

***Ye Shall Be Witnesses  
Unto Me in the Southland***

**The Story of the Southeast Conference  
of the United Church of Christ,  
1966-2015**

**Michael T. Stroud**

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by the  
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of the United Church of Christ

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# CONTENTS

Original 2016 Foreword	5
1. The Early Years of the SEC, 1966-72	10
2. Formation of a Common Voice and Heart, 1973-80	15
3. In Adolescence and Against the Tide, 1980-87	21
4. New Directions toward the UCC Mainstream, 1988-96	32
5. From Struggle to Triumph, 1996-2005	45
6. In the Afterglow of General Synod, 2005-13	66
7. Be Ye Transformed, 2013-15	79

## **A Year of Historical Vignettes**

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1. One Spring Saturday	85
2. Reconciling Racial Differences	87
3. Puritan Days	90
4. The American Missionary Association	94
5. Congregational Methodism	100
6. The Christians of Alabama and Georgia	112
7. German Evangelicals and Swiss Reformed Seek Zion in the Southland	117
8. A Kudzu Pilgrimage—Liberal Congregationalism in the Southland	122
9. Errand in the Wilderness—Congregationalism in Appalachia	127
10. <i>Memories of a Southern Sojourn</i> by Erston M. Butterfield	130

## **APPENDIX**

A. A Timeline of the Southeast Conference	134
B. A Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Southeast Conference	139

For  
**ADALYN WHITT STROUD**  
my mother  
and the Eunice  
to my Timothy  
(2 Timothy 1:5)

## **Original 2016 Foreword**

My interest in the history of the UCC, particularly in the Southeast part of our country, began at the beginning of my experience with it, so to speak. While briefly a student at Vanderbilt University Divinity School in Nashville, I began to explore alternatives, as some seminarians from all traditions do at some point, to my denominational affiliation at the time. Knowing only cursory information about the UCC, I was intrigued and decided to explore Nashville's three UCC congregations—Brookmeade Congregational, First United (E&R), and Howard Congregational. In each congregation, I was overwhelmed by the welcoming spirit, vigorous dedication to mission, and the concern for "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40, KJV) all demonstrated, along with care for a stranger that I was. Although only exposed to it for a short time, I was drawn to it and kept that in mind as I returned to my previous denomination for about a year, when a crisis of faith occurred in which I no longer could affirm the particular traditions I had been taught. God delivered me by my remembering the Rev. Dr. Daniel Rosemergy, then pastor of Brookmeade, telling me that there was a church in Huntsville, Alabama, some 35-40 miles from my home. I went to United Church there one Sunday in 1999, where I was greeted by the simple phrase, "make yourself at home." Accustomed as I was to hard-sell evangelism in the heart of the so-called "Bible Belt," I was very heartened, in an admittedly ironic sort of way, to hear such a low-key approach, and, except for several brief interludes, I have called United Church my spiritual home since.

But there was more. As things turned out, Huntsville was the site of the Annual Southeast Conference Meeting in June of that year. That weekend was a decisive turning point in my life, as I learned that there were many people seeking such an inclusive, hope-filled fellowship like I was. I made a number of friends I still relate warmly to today, and I learned about the wide reach of the Conference to the suffering overseas and at home, its preparation of dedicated clergy, and the witness to justice and peace that is its most distinguishing feature in the Southern religious pantheon. Thus began a calling to me to participate fully in the life of the SEC, sometimes faithfully and devotedly, sometimes over-zealously and disruptively due to unforeseen twists and turns. As the years went on, I realized that a story, presaged in part by Joyce Hallyday's superb *On the Heels of Freedom: The American Missionary Association's Bold Campaign to Educate Minds, Open Hearts, and Heal the Soul of a Divided Nation* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), was in the making, and, taking that together with my interests in American and Southern history and theology and the intersection of them in church life, I proposed writing about it on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Conference to then-Conference Minister Timothy Downs. Downs, having been most gracious to me in forgiving me for a gross mistake in judgment on an unrelated matter,

agreed heartily. Working first with Virginia "Ginny" Nixon and later Dorothy Gager, I spared little expense in gathering as much primary sources as I knew about and a generous helping of secondary ones as well. Spending countless hours electronically reproducing and organizing the material, I came to the following premise that governs this work, the result of my labors and intentions:

In a form of the Christian faith that presently is highly sensitive to cultural trends and "relevance" such as ours is at times, some people are certain to find it strange that preserving denominational history is something worth doing. They might argue, if so inclined, that since churches are besieged by either authoritarian forms of the faith on the one side and secular indifference on the other, spending time contemplating the past is a luxury that no one really has time and resources to afford. If the occurrences or the lessons learned are not immediately serviceable to either demands for growth or else avoidance of decline, then, indeed, it is not worth the effort, except as a way to occupy the minds of older members who approach the subject matter sentimentally or egotistically. With that mentality, a serious reckoning of our past must fight to claim the attention of the present-day faithful.

The United Church of Christ is scarcely alone in this diagnosis. Except for a few European-derived traditions in America (e.g., Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism) that instinctively refer to the past as a guide for determining doctrine, most American churches were shaped by a forward-looking mentality that was a concomitant of the revivalism and restorationist impulses encouraged by the development of America as a haven of freedom. Most believed that not only should, as the metaphor has it, the bathwater of the cultural clothing of the faith be discarded, but the baby should also, in terms of foundational understandings of God, Jesus Christ, and human nature. This may not be evident to many since many of those same groups also claim to be defenders of a received faith and dogma, but many of their beliefs and behaviors were conditioned not so much by preaching and teaching as by local prejudices and customs forged through the necessities of a (usually) rural existence, with only a tangential relationship at best with the Bible and serious Christian reflection. What appears reactionary on the surface is often in the service of an ahistorical pursuit of Utopia or Eden.

So, is it safe to say that we, in the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ, a body reputed to sit lightly to traditional forms of worship, education, and mission (regardless of how strongly local customs are adhered to) thus should embrace our heritage as an antidote to the potent seduction of traditional-ism, created by a hunger for roots not available in existing churchly institutions? I would say wholeheartedly that

it is, if it is understood properly and used in sensible proportions as a leaven (understood Biblically) in the ministry of proclamation and service in the Gospel.

To get to the proper dimensions of our subject at hand, we need to know the general and specific lines of development, mission strategies, successes and failures of the Southeast Conference. I hold that such categories are composed of these activities, among others:

- 1) Church development, especially in the field of new church starts;
- 2) Coordination of mission priorities among congregations, and how such priorities reflected those of national UCC entities and needs in their local communities, with an eye to conflicts between the two and the proportions of each force at different periods in time;
- 3) Work in assisting congregations in developing Christian Education, stewardship, and social ministry programs, a delicate endeavor made even more sensitive by the culturally marginal status of most of those churches;
- 4) Work in developing a program for youth ministry on the association and conference levels, and the difficulties posed by geographical, racial, and theological distances in the Conference;
- 5) Adjudication, if any, of tensions and conflicts resulting from the UCC's traditional espousal of "liberal" social aims, exploring their ideological and cultural shapes;
- 6) Encouragement of women's work and ministry, from the days of traditional auxiliaries to the current heavy presence of ordained and licensed females in the UCC at large and the Conference in particular;
- 7) Relations among the Conference and the associations, the national UCC "instrumentalities" or "covenanted ministries," and local churches, taking into account their legal autonomy one from another and the opportunities and drawbacks posed by this style of governance;
- 8) Relations between the Conference and judicatories of other mainline Protestant denominations in region, with consideration given to some of those churches' status as part of the cultural establishment of the South, and the UCC's relative lack of such reputation;
- 9) Relations between the Conference and associations, and those institutions of higher and theological learning that service or are serviced by the UCC and located within the bounds of the Conference's territory;
- 10) Participation in UCC interests in witness and advocacy on behalf of racial minorities, those professing alternative sexual orientations, better treatment of the environment, relief of poverty and social oppression, and general non-authoritarian forms of social improvement.

Through my research of primary source documents (chiefly the Conference newsletters and minutes of meetings of the SEC Board of Directors) and interviews of selected figures who played prominent roles in shaping the above aspects of the Conference's common life, I seek in this volume to help the following parties better understand and appreciate the peculiar mission of the Conference and its constituent local churches:

- 1) Clergy and lay people belonging to those congregations, with a particular focus upon individuals have recently joined them, and also congregations that have recently become a part of the UCC, or those considering membership therein;
- 2) Staff members of national UCC bodies in their efforts to coordinate work in the denomination at large with that here in the Southeast;
- 3) Students of religious history in the Southeastern United States.

I do not believe that, by any stretch of the imagination, *Ye Shall Be Witnesses Unto Me in the Southland* will immediately provide a viable vision that will guide the Conference to great success in the coming years. As of this writing, in fact, much is uncertain, given a recent elimination of a crucial staff position and talk of territorial realignment in the UCC because of declining membership and subsequent monetary receipts for mission. But I do firmly believe that it is certainly feasible to expect this work shall accomplish a more modest aim, namely to bring our small portion of the Great Story of Gospel of Jesus Christ to the attention of those who have worked and prayed for us over the years and who continue to do so today. And, of course, I trust it will be a proper response of gratitude to our forebears and generosity to those who will follow in our footsteps.

Many individuals helped me in the course of my work, and I name these to express my utmost thanks for their kind and generous assistance: David Ross Anderson, Laura Atkins, Jennifer Austin, Jeff Ayers, Roy Bain, Sara Barnes, David Beebe, Norma Bell, Shirley Berry, Dorothea Bowling, Randall Bowman, John Bracke, Richard (Dick) Braun, Ted Braun, Trudy Braun, Edward Brown, Mary Miller Brueggemann, Erna Bryant, Kim Buchanan, Larry Calbert, Joanne Calhoun, Kathie Carpenter, Ira Chace, Wesley Chenault, Bill Chew, Jeff Cho, Don Clark, Lawrence Clark, Ashley Cook Cleere, Andrew Cooper, Steve Cottingham, David Cox, Jim Crabb, Jeani Cranford, Kevin Crawford, Carl Davis, Nancy Dolinger, George Drumbor, Olga Dunbar, Robin Duckworth, Janice Earnest, Sharron Eckert, Marian Edge, Robert Ellis, Tony England, Leslie Etheredge, John Etter, Barbara Everett, Willard Faulkner, Naomi Faust, Virginia (Ginnie) Ferrell, J. R. Finney II, Emmett Floyd, Andrew Frierson, Jeanne Gaffney, Dorothy Gager, Leah Gass, Sylvia Goodyear, Clint Grantham, Stephen Gray, Teresa Gray, Carolyn Green, W. R. (Bill) Green, Edith Guffey, Will Grier, Ron Hall, Dawn Hamer, Lee Hampton, Don Harris, Joy Harris, Christopher Harter, Destiny Hisey, Scott Holl, Allen Hollis, Skip



Hulett, James Humphrey, Nader Jawhari, Jeff Kaplan, Farrell Kennedy, Sarah Kim, Paula Kirkpatrick, Beth Knight, Roger Knight, Bert Knupp, Marylou Knupp, Lillie Konah, John Lackey, Lillian Hallstrand Lammers, Julie Langdon, Rosa Leverette, Jerry Limbaugh, Odie Lindsey, Janet Little, Audrey Livingston, Chris Lohrstorfer, Chris Lyman Waldron, Judy Manning, James Mason, Chris Mereschuk, Betty Moon, Joan Moore, Truman Moore, Sandra Mullins, Gary Myers, Mary Ellen Myers, Joyce Myers-Brown, Katie Nash, Annie Neal, Claudette Newell, Annette Nielsen, Ginny Nixon, Warner (Buddy) Noles, James Norris, Martha Noyes, Curtis Orio, Brad Ost, JoEllen Ostendorf, Michael Pater, JoAnn Patterson, Barb Powell, Clyde (Bud) Precise, Teresa Pugh, Willard Rabert, Ann Randall, Paul Ridge, Patricia Robbennolt, Kathryn Robinson, John Roemer, Dan Rosemergy, Dianne Russell, Jeremy Rutledge, Bill Ruth, Mary Ruth, Richard (Dick) Sales, Kayin Shabazz, Charlotte Shirley, John Simon, Ellen Sims, Juliette Smith, Susie Smith, Jessica Settler, Orpha Schrag, James Schwarzlose, Lisa Stone, Miriam Syler, Jennifer Taylor, Bette Graves Thomas, Gwen Thomas, Kathy Thrash, Ann Toplovich, Kathy Turton, Henry Tuttle, John Vertigan, Pam Walsh, Bettina Warkentin, Fred Warmbrod, Tom Warren, Wayde Washburn, Cornelius Watts, Linda White, Roger Whitley, Rob Willis, Claire Wilson, Janet Woods, Veronica Wright, Walter Zimmerman. I apologize forthrightly to those whose names I did not recall above, as my memory is not the strongest of my faculties.

But standing out as extraordinarily helpful were the present and recent staffs of the Conference, namely former conference ministers Timothy Downs and Randall Hyvonen and current (designated) conference minister June Boutwell, former administrative assistant Geraldine (Gerri) Ryons-Hudson, generosity coordinator Debbie Spearman, along with my pastor, Robert Hurst. Without their kind thoughts, hearty encouragement, and helpful criticisms, this project would not have been possible at all. I am grateful to God for the witness not only these persons have brought to my work, but to my life in general. That witness is embodied in the story of all the people of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ to which the famed words of our Lord Jesus Christ in Acts 1:8 applies, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (KJV) In the Southland of the United States, truly one of the earth's uttermost parts, here is an account of 50 years of said witness.

Michael T. Stroud  
Decatur, Alabama  
May 2016

## **1. THE EARLY YEARS OF THE SEC, 1966-72**

The Southeast Conference started its tumultuous but glorious half-century's road to the present on January 1, 1966 with an expanded roster of churches from two different backgrounds. One group of only four congregations came from the Indiana-Kentucky Conference, originally members of the Evangelical and Reformed Church of German and Swiss ethnicity. But a larger group of 22 came from the African-American Convention of the South (CS), all except a few a legacy of the American Missionary Association's noble and courageous work in the Reconstruction period of the late 19th century to establish "pure churches" and academically strong schools for the freed slave population throughout the Southeast.

Nobody expected an easy time in balancing their gifts and needs against those of the 102 Euro-American congregations from the Southeast Congregational Christian Convention (SECNV), themselves originating from several different sources. Most were from either a Congregational Methodist or Christian Connection background, two different but basically similar defections from Methodism caused by a lack of lay participation in governance and preaching that took place on days other than the Sabbath. Over time, their theological distinctiveness dissipated and they became little different than their Southern Baptist and Methodist neighbors in rural Alabama and Georgia, with small congregations, worship that was usually held no more frequently than twice a month, and anchored by revivals and homecoming days that were keyed to the cycles and rhythms of farm life. For generations by that time, they had been a counterpoint to a small handful of theologically liberal Congregational churches that held views ranging from neo-orthodoxy to near-Unitarianism and several other congregations in Kentucky and Tennessee founded by the AMA's division to address the needs of poor white residents of Appalachia, in a manner almost exactly parallel to the work among African-Americans. Two other congregations of Welsh descent existed north of Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Largely because of geographical distance and the genial disposition of their leaders (not to mention the centripetal, conformist cultural forces of mid-century America), they stayed out of each other's way and did not entertain thoughts of schism. But the ordeal over integration put an end to the mentality of "live and let live" and inaugurated a new, tension-filled era of attempts to become a significant player on the Southern religious scene, all while dealing with subterranean conflicts that sometimes threatened to break out into the open. The reconciliation that permitted the union to ever take place was in no small part the handiwork of one Edward Brown, a Mississippi-born UCC minister of Southern Baptist background who worked for the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries and its Congregational Christian predecessor to encourage white

congregations to voluntarily accept, and even embrace, integration of the CS and SECNV, over a several-year period.

The Southeast Convention's last conference minister (superintendent was the actual term), James Lightbourne, had just moved to the next-door Southern Conference (churches in North Carolina and the eastern counties of Virginia), so obtaining a new executive was among the more pressing tasks for the fledgling organization. After being led briefly by the East Alabama Association's Minister-at-Large, Jesse H. Dollar, for the first few months, the Conference elected the pastor of the Community Church of Elon College (now Elon), North Carolina, William Jacob "Bill" Andes, conference minister at the first annual meeting, held April 23 and 24 in Nashville at the First Evangelical and Reformed Church (UCC). Subsequent adoption of a constitution and legal name change ensued to make the organization's new identity official.

In the summer, the Conference re-hired a former director of religious education for the old Southeast Convention, Emilie Pitcock, to supervise church work in that field and to administer the summer camping program, which had been integrated with a relative minimum of fuss and would eventually incorporate youngsters from an ecumenically-related denomination, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., by the early 1970s. Two new church plants, in Huntsville and Montgomery (among whose leaders was Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller) in Alabama, were supported by the Conference, while work began on the first in a series of new congregations that would encircle metropolitan Atlanta, Bonanza (later Trinity) UCC, located in the then-southernmost suburban territory of Jonesboro, Georgia.

During 1967, the Conference attempted to gather enough resources to hire a third staff member whose job would entail oversight of new congregations and assistance to the needy African-American churches, who expected particular attention in exchange for giving up their identity with the end of the Convention of the South. But, just like a poor municipality's inability to bolster public services due to lack of a revenue base, the Conference was then unable to fulfill that goal. Around this time, the SEC headquarters left its long-time home on Central Congregational Church's old premises in midtown Atlanta to move along with the church to Clairmont Road in suburban DeKalb County, first to a pre-existing house on the other side of the driveway from the proposed construction.

Like many organizations during that period, SEC leaders thought that improved access to education would help "bring up" the predominantly rural, non-affluent and theologically traditionalist constituency of the SEC to the level, typical elsewhere in the denomination, of doctrinally tolerant, mission-minded, and socially-engaged churches.

To this end, the Conference resolved to set up a training program that, years later, took up residence at LaGrange College in Georgia. This was one of a flurry of ideas about programs whose overall aim was to help the Conference and its churches to overcome their separation from their communities and the world.

By 1968, the Conference was reeling, like the rest of America, from violence and demonstrations in the continuing fight for African-American Civil Rights and against U.S. military actions seeking to suppress world Communism. The Annual Meeting that year passed resolutions mourning the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and seeking the end of police brutality, along with hoping for a "rapid, humane, honorable, and moral solution to the war in Vietnam." However, this decidedly liberal shift in SEC policy and attitudes was likely coming at a price, as Bill Andes alerted churches in July that money was tight and was not coming in from the churches at a sustainable rate. While there was no evidence of a concerted campaign against the SEC and (by extension) the UCC, this was of a piece with conservative opposition elsewhere against controversial national and regional support of causes certain members did not agree with. This dynamic, in all likelihood, was also to blame for the SEC's inability to hire a third staff person.

In 1969, association realignment, in truth a part of the unfinished business of the formation of the Conference, finally got accomplished—partially. The Alabama-Mississippi (Convention of the South origin), Alabama-Tennessee (the E&R churches), and Tennessee-Kentucky (integrated) associations became the Alabama-Tennessee Association. Likewise, the two previously segregated associations both known as Georgia-South Carolina united in October. The other associations consisted of rural or small-town churches and opted to stay separated, with a special "Southern Alabama Area Council" created to coordinate and provide UCC programming for all but the North Alabama Association, namely in-service ministerial training. Several North Alabama Association congregations defected to Alabama-Tennessee when the former declined to join the latter in the aforementioned merger.

Under several different names, lay training seminars and institutes were launched in the late 1960s to help bridge the pulpit-pew gap and to improve communication between the local church and the larger bodies. They helped laity in particular become aware of Conference and national programming that otherwise might be ignored or misconstrued.

At the 1969 Annual Meeting, the Conference elected its first-ever African-American moderator, the Rev. Dr. Homer C. McEwen, pastor of Atlanta's First Congregational Church.

By 1970, the youth began to take on more than traditional fellowship and educational functions as they began to explore social ministries such as community services to Nashville's indigent population and discuss topics like population control and Biblical authority. Likewise, the Conference's Christian Social Action Commission began to protest things like job discrimination against women, the rise of segregationist academies to avoid public school integration, and the continued U.S. presence in Vietnam. Further, a ministers' convocation that year condemned Georgia governor Lester Maddox for inflammatory comments made in the wake of racial riots in Augusta.

Around this time, the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries had gotten involved in Conference life programmatically and financially, in order to furnish leadership and seed money for improved "churchmanship" [sic] and the potential of new churches. But it would take more than bureaucratic expertise to effect a change of heart on the part of rural churches who were increasingly resenting the urbane mores the UCC seemed to represent. For instance, while Circular Congregational Church in Charleston, South Carolina opened a draft counseling center, one licensed minister from the North Alabama Association suffered a leg injury while deployed in Vietnam, indicating widely divergent views and experiences that were not at all easily reconciled, a reality of life in the early years of the SEC.

On January 3, 1971, the North Alabama Association ordained a record six people on the same day, including the first-ever woman in a Conference association, Kathryn Wilson, although she never wound up actually pastoring a congregation; it would not be until 1977 until the first female to actually have a call would be ordained, Ruth Simmons "Kibbie" Steele (now known as Kibbie Ruth) of Central Congregational Church in Atlanta.

Later in 1971, the Conference, in Annual Meeting, reduced the number of commissions from eight to three: Outreach, Church and Ministry, and Education. The month of Annual Meeting was moved to June that year in order to facilitate greater youth participation; the SEC has met every June since.

At around this time, the Conference and UCBHM devised a system whereby each of the major regions of the Conference would have an "enabler," in effect an associate conference minister, supervising programming and mission. This was coupled with an "Identity Program," which featured promotional materials for local congregations such as brochures and radio advertisements, something of a precursor to the "God Is Still Speaking," national campaign thirty years later.

In 1972, the Annual Meeting made resolutions opposing Russian oppression of Jews and supporting gun control. It also endorsed the 17/76 Achievement Fund, a national UCC initiative to help support the six colleges and universities founded by the American Missionary Association for African-American students, three of whom were located in the Conference's territory: Fisk University in Nashville, Talladega College in Alabama, and Tougaloo College in Mississippi.

That Annual Meeting was followed by a period of controversy after the staffing proposal for the Conference was referred back by the Annual Meeting to the Board of Directors, who presumed the authority to implement it despite not having a clear mandate to do so by the Meeting delegates. This proposal included a provision to give the Southern Alabama Area its own associate conference minister and terminate the services of Christian Education director Emilie Pitcock.

Believing there had been a secret bargain to placate the rural associations in Alabama with such an arrangement, one clergyman gave voice to the anger and dismay some in the liberal camp were feeling then:

... The SEC has institutionalized evil. It has institutionalized racism ... The next staff member was to be a Black person ... Yet in large measure, the present crisis is created by efforts to prevent the SEC from having a Black staff member at its highest ministerial level ... the SEC ought to appoint a representative committee to restructure the SEC in the interest of eliminating the 'county unit' system of power which presently exists ... The SEC ought not to give associational status to any group of churches that refuse to admit to membership churches whose members are of another race ... the unconstitutional seat on the Board of Directors which has been given to the representative of the Area Council of Southern Alabama ought to be terminated immediately.

But no one else was in a mood to disrupt the accommodationist consensus, and nothing further came of the idea, despite the fact that the Alabama-Tennessee and Georgia-South Carolina associations, the two bodies in the Conference reflecting the denomination's priorities most closely, paid more than half the Conference's receipts into the Our Christian World Mission (OCWM) system. Ms. Pitcock was terminated in late summer while the Conference firmed up its plans to implement the enabler system. It would be a juncture between two eras in the SEC, yet one in order to conserve the past.

## **2. FORMATION OF A COMMON VOICE AND HEART, 1973-80**

The year 1973 was a demarcation of two cultural epochs in the United States, with January witnessing the Paris Peace Accords bringing an end to U.S. involvement in Vietnam, the *Roe v. Wade* ruling legalizing abortion, and the diminution of political protest. It also marked the midway point of Bill Andes' tenure as SEC conference minister. The culture wars, however, were far from over in the larger society and in the SEC, where a polite polarization held sway for years due to attitudes about race and levels of theological education and cultural sophistication. Neither the conference minister, nor the Board of Directors, nor the associations really had any resources to bring healing and reconciliation to that profound chasm, but business had to go on anyway.

February witnessed the first ordination of an African-American since the Conference's 1966 inception, with Artis Johnson, Sr. becoming the pastor of Bethany Congregational Church in Thomasville, Georgia. Johnson is still in the ministry today as the pastor of the nearby Evergreen Congregational Church in Beachton, Georgia.

At that year's Annual Meeting, a long-range planning committee set goals for the rest of the decade such as "Growing in a Sense of Oneness, through Christian Nurture, Membership Increase/New Congregations, Leadership Training, Task Force Ministry, and support of the Broader Mission of the Church." A resolution also asked for prayer and study in light of the UCC's ordination of the first-ever openly homosexual person to the ministry, William Reagan Johnson, rather than expressing outright condemnation or approval.

Beginning January 1, 1974, Warren Blankenhorn, a minister who had served churches in rural Alabama and Georgia and had a deep knowledge of and affection for them, was named the Southern Alabama Area Minister. This allowed Andes to focus on the liberal group within the Conference, while Blankenhorn basically handled the rest, an arrangement that lasted for about 15 years.

At this point, the Montgomery church (Euro-American) had closed, the Huntsville church was in grave trouble due to cutbacks in the aerospace and defense industries there, but Bonanza UCC was on the verge of getting its permanent building, a mixed record in church planting thus far. With the national economy in the throes of a deep recession and public confidence in institutions eroding due to the Watergate scandal, planning for future church starts would have to be made with greater care and deliberation than was the case in the go-go 1950s and 1960s.

Also, a formal theological education program for ministers lacking seminary training was launched by the Southern Alabama Area in conjunction with LaGrange College.

The 1974 Annual Meeting emphasized the 1776 campaign and evangelism by the local church. The latter part of the year witnessed retirements by Stewardship Council representative Karlton Johnson (whose office, and rent, was shared by the SEC) and North Alabama Pastor-at-Large Guy Colbert.

The "Faith Exploration" encounter group program and local church revitalization initiatives had only been partially successful, reported the SEC's Education Commission, because, in its words, "Some churches think they have all the answers and don't need any help. Some churches don't know they have problems. Afraid to explore their faith for fear they may discover they do not have any." Thus continued the dilemma of implementing nationally-designed programming for entirely different demographic groups.

At the 1975 Annual Meeting, world hunger received attention from delegates, as did the possibility of new churches in Decatur, Alabama; Chattanooga, Tennessee; Atlanta; Mobile, Alabama; and Jackson, Mississippi. None except a second installment in Atlanta's suburban ring would manifest itself, though.

However, in east central Alabama, with the aid of Warren Blankenhorn and the Rev. Charles Bell, a small-town church that had virtually closed came back to life as First Congregational Church of Alexander City. The Men's Fellowship of the East Alabama Association, full of farmers and tradesmen, helped renovate and refurbish the building. The Southern Alabama Area ministry was bearing some other fruit also, as the South Alabama-Northwest Florida Association announced that it would hold extra meetings during the course of the year and solicit UCC ministers from other associations to conduct revivals in its churches.

The act of Central Congregational Church offering hospitality to a Vietnamese refugee family in the house located on the property caused the Conference office to have to move again in early 1976, this time to the lower level of the church building, much like the original location in midtown Atlanta. Likewise, the Alabama-Tennessee Association hired the Rev. Stephen Gray, pastor of Brookmeade Congregational Church in Nashville, as part-time coordinator of its annual meetings, youth gatherings, and other activities.

As a commemoration of the nation's bicentennial and the Conference's 10th anniversary, the Annual Meeting was held in two different locations, Savannah and



Midway in Georgia and featured special guest speakers and a visit to the original Midway Congregational Church, a landmark of Puritan settlement in southeastern coastal Georgia. Delegates also experienced a worship service conducted in the Puritan manner.

But a sober counterpoint to the joyous celebration was raised by the Commission on Church and Ministry, which said that "certain facets of the problem which were formerly looked upon as temporary must now be seen as permanent facts of our way of life ... There are not enough seminary trained ministers to serve the churches of the Conference and there will not be enough in the foreseeable future. The use of lay ministers is not a temporary practice. Were there enough seminary trained persons eager to work in our Conference, the majority of the churches could not afford them a reasonable living. The only acceptable course of action for us is to encourage and assist the local lay ministers who are holding the churches together."

Early 1977 witnessed Andrew Young, a son of the old Convention of the South and tireless Civil Rights champion who had been a U.S. Representative from Georgia since 1973, becoming Ambassador to the United Nations. After leaving that position, he would serve as Mayor of Atlanta with distinction and has been a civic leader since that time. Recalled Homer McEwen, who had known him since boyhood:

When he was ordained in Central, New Orleans, I was honored to give the charge (to him). When Andrew and Jean Childs Young accepted the call to the Thomasville Church, we were frequently together at summer conferences and youth camps, principally at King's Mountain, North Carolina and at Dorchester Center, Midway, Georgia. Our face-to-face opportunities became more frequent when the American Missionary Association sent Andrew to Atlanta to oversee the use of an (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) grant, for which the AMA had accepted fiscal responsibility. Inevitably Andrew's compassion, interest and sense of spiritual adventure pulled him into the vortex of SCLC involvement. He accepted a staff position with the (SCLC) and, with it, a high degree of vocational danger from the labyrinthine intrigue which was native to SCLC from its inception. Andrew's colleagues in the United Church of Christ were, for the most part, unaware of the delicacy of Andrew's position, But, some of us knew the situation from close range.

Urban ministry was the overarching theme of the 1977 Annual Meeting held in Atlanta. But it was also noteworthy for a youth caucus that was the foundation of the ongoing Youth Core program that sought "experiencing identity with our church fellowship from

local to national level as being a body wherein youth has impact and which maintains concerns for youth at all levels.” Some of the new energy was inspired by a Georgia-wide interdenominational approach that encouraged leadership traits and service, including serving on local church governing bodies and the like. But its main drive came from the selfless efforts of Trudi Sanford of Central Congregational Church in Atlanta, who had a particular acumen and heart for youth. Later that year, the Alabama-Tennessee Association would introduce “Pop-In” weekends where youth from several churches would gather at a host church for fun and fellowship. At that meeting, the Outreach Commission determined that Gwinnett County, Georgia would be the ideal place for an Atlanta-area new church start. That congregation launched in early 1978 under the name Button Gwinnett UCC, the namesake (like that of the county of location) being a signatory to the Declaration of Independence from the original Midway Church.

That meeting also received a serious Church and Ministry report stating that the morale and family life of many ministers had reached a crisis point. As the report concluded, “In the relationship between the pastor and the congregation we must realize that the people of God have a capacity for ministering unto the shepherd in ways that we have ignored or failed to comprehend.”

That year witnessed a highly controversial matter on the national stage as the UCC General Synod received a report looking with favor upon expressions of sexuality heretofore perceived as taboo or sinful by the church and society, including homosexuality. The rural associations took immediate action to bar any consideration of ordaining gays or lesbians to ministry, while the Georgia-South Carolina Association refused to make heterosexual orientation a prerequisite for ordination.

Joining the Conference family of new churches in 1977 were Community Church in Fairfield Glade, Tennessee, an ecumenical initiative in a resort community; and Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia, a former Presbyterian congregation. The Pilgrimage church would provide, somewhat serendipitously, a third “spoke” of church expansion to metropolitan Atlanta.

In 1978, the Georgia Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Conference began talks to prepare for a potential merger of the DOC and UCC nationally in the future. Although the merger never took place, valuable insights and sharing did occur that laid the foundation for future cooperation. And in April, the first known staff-sharing arrangement occurred when Edwin Mehlhaff, later interim SEC conference minister in his own right, came from the South Central Conference (Texas, Louisiana) as a stewardship consultant.

In conjunction with nearby conferences in the Southern U.S., the SEC adopted a covenant for a "Regional Mission Strategy" that paid heed to "the ways by which God is at work through our denomination in the Southern Rim sector of our nation. Responding to high population growth and mobility, the opportunity occasioned by new and expanding urban centers, and the effects of emerging social issues on people, we feel a special need to covenant with each other and with Our Lord to be faithful to the Gospel ... Our challenge is to make more visible the witness and spirit of our United Church by strengthening existing fellowships and by building new congregations."

The Rev. Joyce Myers, a former missionary to Angola, became the southern representative of the UCC's Office for Church Life and Leadership and set up offices in Atlanta.

Teacher training workshops in the recent Christian Education: Shared Approaches methodology took place throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, with a high participation by Conference churches.

Examples of ecumenical community ministry occurred with the Church of the Savior in Knoxville, Tennessee participating in a local food pantry, clothes closet, and transportation service for the needy, and Pilgrim Congregational Church in Birmingham's membership in Greater Birmingham Ministries, a similar operation that also advocated for the underprivileged and the oppressed.

Ending a long period of neglect in part due to the consolidation of national men's and women's fellowships into the Council for Lay Life and Work, women's concerns got a needed boost from the establishment of a task force in May 1979. Part of the group's statement of purpose made clear an intent to "inform for responsible choices the difficult issues of our time: Sexuality, (the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution), Racism/Sexism, Abortion, Battered Women, (Inclusive) Language Renewal." In the fall, for the first time ever, women from the four conferences in the Southern U.S. met jointly for what became an ongoing tradition, the Southern Regional Women's Meeting, held first at Bethany Hills Camp, a Disciples of Christ operation, in Tennessee. Small group meetings, workshops, worship, and fellowship opportunities became the hallmark of this biennial gathering.

The Annual Meeting in 1979 met at Talladega College and voted to condemn the plan to impose the death penalty upon a convicted killer in Florida and recent resurgences of the Ku Klux Klan in places like Alabama and North Carolina.

In June 1979, the Conference was honored to have one of its own, Milton Hurst, of Talladega College and First Congregational Church of that city in Alabama, serve as moderator of the UCC General Synod. Years later, he became the licensed pastor of that congregation and inspired many developments in the life of the Conference and the Alabama-Tennessee Association.

LaGrange College's close relationship with the Conference bore another fruit in the summer, with an Institute of Religion that featured a refresher course on both the Old and New Testaments. This gathering was partly financed by gifts from the foundation established by the Oak Grove Congregational Christian Church of Pine Mountain, Georgia (near LaGrange), which held an annual fair to raise funds for outreach ministries like the Summer Institute.

Although the Georgia-South Carolina Association welcomed in October 1979 the first new African-American church into the Conference since the 1966 inception, Southwest Congregational Church in Atlanta, that congregation, from an African Methodist Episcopal background, was only affiliated with the UCC for two years.

Coming to the conclusion of nearly 45 years of active ministry in the Congregational Christian Churches and the UCC, William Andes announced his retirement to take place in the spring of 1980. He reminisced about his tenure to *The Southeast News* in March 1980, "... one of the good things is that we reduced the number of Committees and Commissions and the number of Associations. That helped us out with the strategy of administration and that sort of thing. Another good point has been New Church Development ... Another has been the up-growth in OCWM giving—from about \$30,000 in 1966 to \$98,000 this year. One of the hard but joyful situations are the many small churches we have. It's hard to find enough ministers for those churches and money to go with it. Finally, we probably have not done enough in social action and I hope there is a readiness to move forward there." The latter two situations tended to endure throughout the 1980s.

### **3. IN ADOLESCENCE AND AGAINST THE TIDE, 1980-87**

The Conference picked as Bill Andes' successor the Rev. Emmett Owen Floyd, a Georgia native and Naval Reserve officer who started his career in the Southern Baptist Convention. Floyd, coming from the pulpit of Congregational UCC in Greensboro, North Carolina, brought an understanding pastoral sensibility and a comprehension of diversity to the office. As he put it in the June 1980 *Southeast News*, "... The streams that make up the UCC—particularly the ones that have been predominant in this part of the country—have been groups of Christians who have been committed to what is now coming to pass in American society ... I think that we have the kind of church structure with its freedom and with its flexibility that enables us to operate in ways that may not be available to some other church groups." Floyd was formally installed during the 1980 Annual Meeting, and during his tenure, he would receive a commission as a Rear Admiral in the Chaplain Corps of the USNR.

The youth program continued its success with an overflow crowd at a "Mini-Camp" for the Southern Alabama Area in northwestern Florida and an active youth council of the Alabama-Tennessee Association. In the summer the Conference sent a large delegation to the UCC National Youth Event in Minnesota.

Meanwhile, the two new church projects in metropolitan Atlanta were progressing slowly but steadily, with Button Gwinnett UCC receiving UCBHM grants for construction. The Conference called for \$21,000 in raising funds for new church start projects during 1980. All in all, the narrative of a homogenous, technology-driven "Sunbelt" took hold in the discussions about church expansion in the region, without regard to traditions or customs of older times. While this approach generated some energy and enthusiasm, it would eventually prove unrealistic in the face of the region's entrenched conservatism and distaste for the social activism prized by the UCC in most of its manifestations. This was in somewhat ironic contrast with the strong growth in the 1970s that UCC congregations of predominantly minority composition had made.

Nonetheless, this was a period of relative peace and prosperity for the Conference as a whole, with one noteworthy achievement occurring during 1980, where the SEC took the top prize for increase in OCWM giving among all conferences in the entire UCC. Wrote Conference Minister Emmett Floyd in his report to the 1981 Annual Meeting, "We are a part, a significant part, in the great Kingdom of God which He [sic] is building. I rejoice in the strong sense of fellowship, the common commitment to our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the vision of a more faithful church to which we are called." Even the news that the Youth Core program would have to be disbanded due to a lack of funding did not dampen spirits.

An interesting if not comprehensive resolution came from the 1981 Annual Meeting that expressed as well as any statement before or since the UCC's aspirations for the world and church:

(The SEC) reaffirms its commitment to the Biblical message of God's covenant with the people of God; of God's faithful covenant love, calling us in turn to love; of God's call to justice, mercy, and faithfulness; and of God's vision of *Shalom*, that is, a vision of peace, health, and wholeness for all people.

The Southeast Conference reaffirms its commitment to the task of the church both to bring the message of salvation and inner freedom in Jesus Christ and the message of salvation and liberation in society, as the Church becomes the agent of the Kingdom of God transforming the world.

The Southeast Conference also desires to speak with the voice of the prophets, calling the leaders of our government and our economy to a remembrance of the Biblical claims of justice and peace. We call upon the President, the Congress, and the courts of the United States to order their priorities in favor of people, and especially of the disadvantaged, the orphaned, the aged, the widowed, the alien within our gates, and the poor. While recognizing the requirement of fiscal stewardship in government, we urge that the Congress support such programs as will 'promote domestic tranquility' by providing righteousness and justice, and will 'provide for the common defense' not alone with arms but with the establishment of bonds of commerce and friendship throughout the world. The cost of the common defense should as equally be subject to the claims of fiscal stewardship and limitation as those programs which meet human need.

Along with the teaching that the Church is to be concerned the personal conversion, let us continue to proclaim that our Savior had come into our world and flesh to redeem the whole world and to heal and minister to its people, both body and soul.

Along with the sound teaching that the Church should speak to the religious and moral issues in the political realm, we reclaim the role not only of evangelist but also of prophet.

We turn away from the confusion of loyalty to nation with loyalty to God, and while declaring our intention to be good and faithful citizens, we remind our people of the higher claims of conscience before the Court of Eternal Justice.

We intend to be faithful to the Biblical faith, and therefore to call every area of life, both public and personal, under the prophetic witness of that faith.

The Conference received several new staff members during 1981, with the arrival of the Rev. Sandra Mullins as associate minister for Christian Education due to an initiative by

OCLL to promote women in church leadership roles; Virginia McCamey, who worked for both OCLL and the Conference; and Sue Hartman, administrative assistant who also was a trained Christian Educator. Hartman stayed only a short time, though, as her minister husband found a position in Missouri. Annette Piper replaced her in summer 1982.

In financial news, the Conference began participating in the national UCC "New Initiatives in Church Development" capital funds campaign in March 1982. And speaking of newer congregations, the early 1980s witnessed the late 1970s class of church starts in the SEC gain buildings. Community Church in Fairfield Glade, Tennessee; Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia; and Button Gwinnett UCC in Lilburn, Georgia all constructed sanctuaries and education and office space between 1981 and 1983.

In the latter part of 1982, Mary Elias, a missionary teacher serving in Sri Lanka, conducted a tour of the Conference while on furlough. As she said, her intention was that "Through the feeling of tolerance and respect for other faiths it is possible to build a community without caste and creed forming barriers." This sensibility had mostly replaced older notions of Christianity conquering a culture with the intent of full-scale conversion, a viewpoint that had enthusiastic supporters and angered detractors alike.

Succeeding Stephen Gray in the office of Alabama-Tennessee Association Coordinator was Daniel Rosemergy of Nashville, who in 1983 became pastor of Brookmeade Congregational Church there. That association proved to be a leader in youth programming, with very enthusiastic participation in events and gatherings throughout the 1980s. The Southern Alabama Area, meanwhile, continued to provide the "mini-camp" program as the flagship for work among young people. Some youth groups participated in the Habitat for Humanity organization's efforts to build homes for residents of places such as Morgan and Scott counties in rural Tennessee. Habitat, of course, was the result of work by an old Southeast Convention alumnus, Millard Fuller, a son of the Congregational Christian Church of Lanett, Alabama.

Annette Piper departed the position of Administrative Assistant during the summer of 1983 and was replaced by Kathy Martin.

Around this time, the Church and Ministry Commission was promoting the use of female ministerial students-in-care or ordained ministers, something that had not caught on even in the more liberal sectors of the Conference. As the 1983 report put it, "Sexist biases cause many churches to miss out on some excellent candidates!" Also, the Commission, in conjunction with a major revision of the UCC's *Manual on Ministry*,

began advocating stricter standards for ordination such as psychological testing, UCC history and polity courses, and field experience, things that would eventually become mandatory for students-in-care (now termed "members in discernment") in most of the Conference's associations. In any case, Conference Minister Emmett Floyd noted in his annual 1983 report that the Southeast Conference ranked near the bottom of all conferences in ministerial salaries, meaning that an old problem was stubbornly persisting.

Despite some opposition, the 1983 Annual Meeting passed a resolution calling upon the U.S. Government to seek a bilateral nuclear arms freeze with the Soviet Union and to reallocate spending on armaments as those toward social welfare programs instead. This was at a time when the Cold War was being vigorously renewed by President Ronald Reagan and other U.S. officials; later in the decade, people such as Joyce Myers and others would protest U.S. support of the "Contra" anti-Communist guerrillas in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and nearby Central American lands.

Late in 1983, First Congregational Christian Church in Phenix City, Alabama became the first of numerous churches in the conservative faction of the SEC to vocally and publicly protest the larger UCC's association with, in one member's words, "certain vital issues ... i.e., homosexuality, inclusive language, World Council of Churches," believing itself "no longer ... in agreement with the increasing liberal principles, philosophies, and doctrines of the UCC." This set off a nearly year-long effort to secede from the UCC, something the East Alabama Association did not consent to. This was only one of the first emergences from subterranean status of non-metropolitan discontent and hostility (with Crossville, Tennessee's First Congregational Church withdrawing the year before in a similar anti-UCC animus), and more was to come, especially in the 1990s, as the issue of gay and lesbian ordination came closer to the point where it could no longer be shoved under the rug with euphemisms and niceties.

At the end of 1983, Virginia McCamey retired from her dual position as Conference and OCLL office secretary.

After the turn of the year, the Conference witnessed its first person of alternative sexual orientation ordained in the person of Leanne Tigert, of Brookmeade Congregational Church in Nashville, who later became a leader in the UCC LGBT Coalition.

Also, in 1984, for the first time, some congregations participated in collecting a special Peace offering to benefit local initiatives and national advocacy for disarmament and related causes.



David Loar, pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd (UCC) in Crossville, Tennessee, took over from Daniel Rosemergy as the Alabama-Tennessee Association Coordinator in the middle of 1984.

Despite the setbacks of pastoral changes at the two new church starts in suburban Atlanta, there were positive signs. Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia reported in January 1984 that it had about 125 members, 70 of whom attended regularly. Meanwhile, Button Gwinnett UCC found things rougher going: "(It) has experienced a high turnover in membership, so it's difficult to maintain the fervor and commitment so evident earlier. (It is) doing many things, however, such as making (its) facility available to various community groups (a Jewish congregation meets there regularly) and (it provides) for groups such as 'tough love,' a program for parents whose children are on drugs."

The Conference itself still engaged in a balancing act financially, as it sought to afford the salary of Sandra Mullins and sending a fair share to the national offices by encouraging increased OCWM giving. With OCLL coming forward to pay for Mullins' services, the Conference Board of Directors decided to retain OCLL director Reuben Sheares (a graduate of Talladega College in Alabama and one-time pastor of Howard Congregational Church in Nashville, Tennessee) as a consultant to help determine the exact staffing needs and the best way to meet them. Sheares met in September with the Board and laid out these points:

... There is a need for VISION. To effectively provide leadership to the Conference, the Board needs, along with its staff, to provide the vision for the SEC, articulate it to the churches and intentionally supply the administrative structure throughout the Conference so that the vision can become reality.

... The Conference faces certain 'givens' which are problematic: lack of identity in the South, geographical distance, lack of growth, small numbers and small churches who may not feel part of the wider United Church of Christ, autonomy of local churches and financial constraints.

... Because Board members lack understanding of their roles and responsibilities as a Board, staff is not given clear direction. To function effectively, role distinctions and expectations between those responsible for policy formation (the Board) and those responsible for implementing the policy (the staff) must be clearly understood. To be supportive of staff, the Board must also be willing to help staff grow and function within the organization.

... The Board needs to reassess its roles and responsibilities to the Conference in Annual Meeting. Does the Annual Meeting give the Board the proper authority? Is this clearly defined? Because of the infrequency of the meetings of the Conference, there is a

greater need to have a strong foundational policy laid down by the Board and delegated to staff to implement. If we understand this as our authority invested by the Conference, we must be held responsible. Decisions need to be arrived at through PARTICIPATION and then shared with the Conference. VISIBILITY, IDENTIFICATION and PERSONIFICATION of Board and staff to churches is essential ...

To carry out Sheares' recommendations, the Executive Committee of the Board resolved to have OCLL's Joyce Myers conduct training sessions with the Board, have the Nominating Committee devise a job description for Board members, and to set goals and priorities for each year before attending to other tasks.

In March 1985, the Conference began work on assisting a group in Columbia, South Carolina to become a UCC congregation, an effort which lasted only a few years before being suspended.

That summer, instead of the usual annual business meeting, a special "Faith Alive in '85" event was held in Atlanta, with music, worship, and workshops intended toward unifying the delegates into one purpose were offered.

Late in the year, the Board of Directors impaneled an "Area-Wide Mission Strategy" task force that posed questions like these:

... What should the Conference be doing? ... What should the Associations be doing?  
... Should the duties of Conference staff be more clearly defined programmatically and geographically? ... Do office management procedures and priorities need to be clarified? ... Do lines of staff accountability need to be clarified? ... What is the level of trust and confidence among Conference staff and among members of the Conference?  
... What is happening to Our Church's Wider Mission giving? Why? ... What are the people's perceptions of OCWM? ... Is the Conference moving in the direction of specific goals?

Two concrete problems were discovered: "Increasing OCWM giving throughout the Conference ... Support for clergy in crisis." The OCWM shortfall was around \$20,000 at this time.

Despite giving on a slight increase in late 1985, the Executive Committee recommended the phasing out of Sandra Mullins' position and the separate bookkeeping work, which never materialized. But the Committee nonetheless set a goal of eventually remitting 30% of OCWM receipts to the national treasury. That never happened either, however.

After resigning as pastor of Atlanta's First Congregational Church, the Rev. Marvin Morgan established a new African-American congregation in that city's far westside known as "Atlanta UCC." This small group constructed a building in the late 1980s and eventually merged with a Baptist congregation before closing in 2005.

The spring of 1986 witnessed a visit to the Conference's territory by UCC Commission for Racial Justice executive Benjamin Chavis to investigate intimidation of black voters in several Alabama counties by means of questioning absentee voters in an effort to determine fraud. In this Chavis received the cooperation of the Rev. James Myers and First Congregational Christian Church in Birmingham.

Also around that time, Warren Blankenhorn announced the creation of a fund, administered by the East Alabama Association, to aid church starts "considered to be too small for aid by (UCBHM)." It was capitalized by the sale of the property of the defunct First Congregational Christian Church in Columbus, Georgia and named for that and for a traveling 19th-century evangelist who planted "Christian Connection" congregations throughout eastern Alabama and western Georgia, H. W. Elder. This fund would in later years be the occasion for an internal controversy when Emmett Floyd's successor came into the conference minister office, though, as Blankenhorn accused the Conference, without evidence to back up his charges, of using the fund to purchase items such as office equipment.

Recommendations from the Area-Wide Mission Strategy Task Force in March 1986 were that Administrative Assistant Kathy Martin undergo enrichment training and that an outside consultant evaluate office procedures. By Spring, a budget containing salary raises, an outside audit of the Conference's books, accounting software, and increased giving in OCWM to the national entities of the UCC was prepared for the delegates to the 1986 Annual Meeting. Later on, the Board of Directors divested all of its stocks from companies who dealt with any business in South Africa, in order to protest the Apartheid regime and associated racial violence there.

At the time of Annual Meeting, held this year in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Alabama-Tennessee Association Coordinator David Loar announced the beginnings of what would later become the Christian Social Justice Commission, through the form of a Social Action subcommittee. Representatives were sent to three national advocacy gatherings, and the committee worked to promote justice and peace programming and offerings throughout the Conference. Several individuals went on tours sponsored by the United Church Board for World Ministries in foreign lands.

One highlight of the Annual Meeting was a telephone conversation held with UCBWM missionary John Parsons, serving in South Africa, who, according to David Beebe, pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, attributed “poignancy in hearing ... Parsons ... speaking quietly and guardedly, because he could be in trouble with the government if he answered a question incorrectly.”

Despite positive developments, there was continued frustration and confusion in regard to financing new church starts, particularly with UCBHM as a partner. As Loar wrote to UCBHM head C. Shelby Rooks:

It appears that we are in some kind of catch-22. The Southeast as a region is receiving many blue collar and white collar young families from the North. We find out informally from time to time that they are here in our Conference, but we don't have churches near them to attend. Yet, for us to start new churches we need to come up with the matching seed money to get proposals for new churches considered. As a small, spread out conference, we are financially strapped. Yet the need for new churches within our area is great.

Some of the new possibilities during this period included locations such as South DeKalb County in Georgia, Williamson County in Tennessee (south of Nashville and near a new General Motors manufacturing facility), and Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

January 1987 witnessed a first serious report from the Area-Wide Mission Strategy Task Force, consisting of eleven recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1: That we explore the possibility of urging the consolidation of the six associations which now comprise the conference into three associations whose boundaries would coincide roughly with state lines.

RECOMMENDATION 2: That if recommendation 1 is implemented, the composition of the Board of Directors might logically be changed to the following: a. 4 voting officers; b. 3 representatives from each of the 3 associations; c. the chair of the Personnel Committee; d. the chair of the Finance Committee; e. the chair of each program area; f. 3 at-large members. Total number on Board would be 25.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The members of the Board of Directors should be selected in the following manner: a. Officers nominated by the Nominating Committee and elected at the Annual Meeting; b. Association representatives—each association would nominate to the Nominating Committee for election at the Annual Meeting; c. All other positions—nominated by the Nominating Committee for election at the Annual Meeting.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Board of Directors should meet at least quarterly.

RECOMMENDATION 5: The Nominating Committee should be composed of 5 members elected on a rotating basis at the Annual Meeting.

RECOMMENDATION 6: Stewardship/OCWM responsibility should be a function of the Board assigned to a subcommittee of 5 members.

RECOMMENDATION 7: There should be 5 program areas: a. Christian Nurture and Education; b. Church and Ministry; c. Evangelism and Church Growth; d. Women in Church and Society; e. Social Action.

RECOMMENDATION 8: The Chair of each Association equivalent should be a member of the respective program area.

RECOMMENDATION 9: A Conference staff person should be assigned to each program area.

RECOMMENDATION 10: Each year, the Board will determine program area emphasis and funding allocation.

RECOMMENDATION 11: The following staffing pattern should be considered: a. Conference minister, based in Atlanta, and responsible for serving as national and ecumenical liaison, conference-wide placement, coordination of staff/program efforts, spiritual leader; b. Area Minister for Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina (40 churches), Area Minister for Alabama and Northwest Florida (57 churches). Each would have conference-wide program responsibilities and each would be area liaison and provide pastoral care, c. Executive Administrator, based in Atlanta and responsible for the following: 1. All administrative systems and fiscal functions. 2. Coordination of all meetings. 3. Draft correspondence for professional staff. 4. Answer routine correspondence and phone calls. 5. Bookkeeping. 6. Coordination of all annual meeting arrangements, d. Other support staff as and where needed.

Meanwhile, attempts to increase OCWM remittances to national were falling short by a considerable amount, as draws on funds had not even been repaid. As Emmett Floyd put it, "The Finance Committee (has been) trying to settle up the end of the year—sweating out the first ten days of this year to see if we were going to remain solvent. Cash was down to about \$3000. We need to get on top of our financial situation ..."

Likewise, Social Justice chairman David Loar reported that only six Conference congregations were involved with the UCC's Peace with Justice Network. By June 1987, the Conference would need some \$61,000 to remain at its then capacity for staff and programming. With little or no Conference funding available, the Outreach Commission solicited grant proposals from local churches for community initiatives to combat hunger.

Wrote Georgia-South Carolina Association Social Action and OCWM Committee chairman William Jackson to that association's congregations on February 19:

At this very moment we have approximately \$1,000.00 in general operating funds to pay salaries and current expenses. This unfortunate situation is not the result of poor management. It is the result of uneven cash flow.

... The problems with cash flow related to the unevenness of the payment of OCWM contributions by the churches. Most of the contributions are made in September or October after the Southeast Conference Annual Meeting. It is just impossible to operate the Conference program efficiently and effectively with the present income pattern.

Jackson went on to implore churches to contribute either monthly or quarterly.

With Emmett Floyd having announced his scheduled retirement at the end of 1987, the Conference had on top of its financial worries the added anxieties of securing another executive. All the other pressing concerns tended to tuck the needed preparations into a rear corner of people's consciousness, to the point that when the end of the year and Floyd's tenure came, the Conference was really unprepared.

But before then, structural issues were hampering the effectiveness of the Conference in carrying out its work, and the Area-Wide Mission Strategy Task Force recommended a number of changes, including bringing up the old idea of having one consolidated association for Alabama and nearby territories, sending some Conference staff outside the Atlanta area to serve the geographically far-flung churches, having the Nominating Committee select the chairs of the Finance and Personnel committees, aligning the association meetings more closely in time with the Annual Conference Meeting in order to eliminate the delay in electing association chairs of committees who automatically got seats on the corresponding Conference committee, dividing the Outreach Commission into two different boards, and so on.

Warren Blankenhorn, still tending to his responsibility for the rural part of the Conference, told the Conference Board of Directors in May, "Ministerial placement remains a high priority, and in the very small membership churches it is very difficult to find capable leadership ... It is agonizing to see churches threatened by no vision, even though the roof is falling in and the windows are falling out."

At around this time, the Rev. Richard "Dick" Sales, a one-time missionary to Africa arrived in the SEC and began adapting a ground-breaking theological education by extension program that he developed originally for his charges abroad to the needs of ministers in the Southern Alabama Area. This would, after further refinement and

adaptation, become the Theology Among the People program by the late 1990s and can be said to be the embryonic form of the current PATHWAYS program.

In a move very much in keeping with the Conference's (or at least the liberal faction's thereof) interest in peace, David Loar spent two weeks in Nicaragua with the Witness for Peace organization, which "interviewed church people (both Protestant and Catholic), and government and opposition people, U.S. embassy representatives—and spent a week in the area of the country where recent fighting had occurred, interviewed citizens affected by the war, and saw first-hand its results."

#### **4. NEW DIRECTIONS TOWARD THE UCC MAINSTREAM, 1988-96**

The Area-Wide Mission Strategy Task Force was put on hold during 1988 as a year of transition began. As Emmett Floyd stepped down into retirement, Horace Sills, a veteran UCC conference minister who had consulted with the Conference back in the late 1960s, assumed the interim position. Sills took the liberty of candidly expressing his views about the state of the Conference in February:

... I feel the need to report some grave concern about the spirit of this staff. These people have been hurting for some time and they needed to have someone listen to that hurt and understand their concerns ...

... I feel the need ... to report to the Executive Committee where your staff is on such matters and, if you concur, ask you to share with us in accomplishing changes and/or activities which will address these. The concerns expressed were these:

... This Conference needs desperately to come to a consensus on a FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE for the Conference. The Mission Strategy proposal will help this somewhat, but even that does not fully describe function adequately.

... Coupled with the first concern is the serious feeling that the ROLE of the CONFERENCE and the ROLE of the ASSOCIATIONS needs to be clarified. Does program develop at the Association level, the Conference level or both? Does [sic] Warren Blankenhorn and David Loar work PRIMARILY for the Associations to which they are assigned or for the Conference or both? Do the people of the congregations understand the roles of the Associations and Conference? How does the planning which goes on in the Associations affect the work of the Conference?

... The Southeast Conference staff should be meeting with graduating seminarians to recruit leadership for Conference congregations. The concern expressed here is for a more aggressive approach to pastor placement.

... We need to improve and enhance our educational program for bi-vocational pastors. The staff sees this as a major goal to be accomplished soon and we have discussed several ways we might begin to work at this. Its importance to those serving in some of our congregations and to the congregations themselves is obvious.

... It is felt to be imperative that we conduct orientation and/or training for persons elected to the Board of Directors, Commissions, Committees, etc. The way some members of the Board of Directors get elected by the Associations during fall meetings of these organizations, affects the timing of any orientation which might take place. Those elections affect when a fall Board meeting can be held. Regardless of such matters, people elected to such important positions need to have an opportunity to



meet together to learn what is expected of them before they are asked to function in those positions.

... The last issues discussed by the staff reveals something of their pain and frustration. It is stated here using the exact words as they were spoken. 'We need to just function for six months.' As interim Conference Minister for a little while, I have tried to assure this staff that we will function ...

In March, the Search Committee produced a nominee, the Rev. Roger Duayne Knight, associate for OCLL in the northern central U.S. and based in Minnesota, who had previously served churches in Iowa and Wisconsin and the Nebraska Conference as an associate conference minister. Knight brought a gentle pastoral sense and understanding manner with him to handle what was by now a most difficult situation. For the bottom was falling out financially as numerous small churches, in what was very hard not to believe was a coordinated effort on their part, discontinued giving to OCWM. Things had become so severe that Sills reported a checking account balance so low that bill payments were deferred for days or even weeks. In 1988, of the 98 congregations on the Conference's roster, 69 of them gave no OCWM at all, a percentage of 70 percent, which remains the low-water mark to this day. Still, youth and Christian Education workshops and events took place on a self-supporting basis.

As a means of beefing up the staff and moving forward with rebuilding the Conference, UCBHM was requested to provide funding through 1989 for someone to conduct "Mission Strategy Planning" work. For the small congregations served by bi-vocational clergy, a need emerged to hold convocations on weekends when many could not attend otherwise. The church and ministry committees of the associations felt the need to align themselves more closely with national expectations as outlined in the denomination's *Manual on Ministry*. In addition to a potential new start in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, two other Tennessee communities were good prospects for church plants: Tellico Village near Knoxville and a former Cumberland Presbyterian congregation in Waverly, west of Nashville.

By April, though, the Conference had to put together a budget with a \$20,000 deficit and enlist the use of a money market account in a checking capacity to handle the cash drought. In June as the Annual Meeting time came up, Knight, who was duly confirmed as conference minister during the Annual Meeting proper, consulted with the Board about handling the financial crisis, as the only thing that could be considered frivolous was a five-year lease on a copier that could not be terminated. Discussions were held on professional fund-raising and the possible sale of land. Eventually, the UCC Insurance Board wound up paying part of Roger and Beth Knight's moving expenses to Georgia from Minnesota. Later in the month, an *ad hoc* task force determined that

both short- and long-term needs would put the Conference into further significant budget deficits. One immediate policy change was a moratorium on scholarships to attend functions such as youth or women's events unless there were actually funds on hand. In effect, the task force proposed the policy to pay only "fixed cost items" in the budget, except for events or programs that would "result in direct improvement of the financial crisis in the Conference." In July, the staff collectively and voluntarily accepted a one-quarter reduction in both salary and workload. Also, by August, the UCC Stewardship Council had begun a stewardship training program that would send volunteers into churches to speak about the Conference's problems. The new church start in Columbia, South Carolina closed and would not re-activate until the mid-1990s. After hearing an offer to reduce time and salary by the staff, the Board of Directors declined the measure until November.

And more turbulence would occur throughout the remainder of the year, even up to the time of Roger Knight's installation. Kathy Martin resigned as Administrative Assistant and was replaced by Kathryn Foster, a one-time assistant in the national Presbyterian office. David Loar resigned as Alabama-Tennessee Association Coordinator to take a pastorate in Ohio. He, unlike Martin, was not replaced, as the Association and the SEC came to terms to designate Knight as the Association Coordinator, a money-saving move that brought about an unforeseen beginning of the decline of the association system. In November, with some improvement to the bottom line, the freeze on spending was lifted, with the proviso that a commission chairperson and the Conference Minister would approve any expenditure for the remainder of the year and that expenses for the first six months of 1989 would not exceed one-half of a commission's allocation.

Churches that were in the midst of building programs during late 1988 were Atlanta UCC and the new United Community Church in Waverly, Tennessee.

In February 1989, after reviewing a December 1988 consultation with UCBHM officials that new sources of revenue had to be located to insure the viability of the organization, the Board of Directors voted to begin the process of conducting a capital funds campaign, the first ever in the SEC's 23-year history. Motions to consider boundary realignments with other conferences and to seek a merger with the four regions of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) inside the Conference's bounds were voted down. By February, the Finance Committee reported a significant increase in OCWM giving over 1988.

By May, the Conference had come to a consensus with UCBHM on staffing arrangements, particularly in light of the impending retirement of Warren Blankenhorn.

Generally speaking, future staff would be hired to serve according to function, rather than be generalists serving specific geographical areas. This really represented a decisive movement toward the liberal faction of the Conference and its standards of professionalism (at base, churches in this group were far bigger givers to OCWM) and away from the more conventional, family-oriented programming of the rural, conservative (in relative terms) faction. This difference would become particularly pronounced by the late 1990s. Probably sensing the likelihood that they would not affect Conference policy as before and wanting to resolve the tensions of being tradition-minded in a denomination that was anything but, all but one of the churches of the North Alabama Association departed the UCC and the Central Alabama Association in effect merged with what was now the East Alabama-West Georgia Association, renamed to reflect the fact that some Georgia churches had belonged to it since the 1950s.

At the 1989 Annual Meeting, held at Emory University in Atlanta, delegates postponed a vote on a constitution and bylaws that would expand the number of commissions to six in order to study its viability, passed a budget that increased OCWM giving to national entities by half and increased support of new church starts. Also, a new location task force was formed to find an alternative headquarters for the SEC, which was outgrowing the lower level of Central Congregational Church's premises.

In September, an *ad hoc* Church Development Committee proposed a 10-year development plan for the Board of Directors. It worked from the following premises:

... a recent study indicates that 85% of mainline churches need to relocate in order to 'go where the people are.' Fifteen new UCC churches in the Southeast Conference are projected over the next ten years. There are a minimum of 30 locations in the Southeast Conference where population growth will occur ... at least in theory, two new 500-member churches per year would be required just to take care of UCC members moving into the Southeast Conference area. However, in Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee, departures will balance out with arrivals. It is predicted that in the next five years the Southeast Conference will see the arrival of 125,000 young, educated, northern black professionals. UCC churches in the Southeast area are playing catch-up.

Demographics on the level of statistics were all the Conference had to work with, and they proved to be misleading and inaccurate when other factors, such as political and cultural affinities, were taken into consideration.

Late October witnessed the Executive Council of the UCC agree to assist the SEC, which signed a covenant therewith one month earlier, after extensive consultations with UCBHM. The conference would receive an administrative assistant salary grant, half of

the salary for someone to work in church development, a larger percentage of new church costs assumed by UCBHM, leadership training, annual institutes on evangelism, a feasibility study for a capital funds campaign, and potential purchase of land sites and support up to 75% for new congregations. It also concurred with the Church Development Committee's hopes for 15 new churches within a 10-year frame of time.

As the new decade of the 1990s began, the Conference found itself, once again, restructuring its staff configuration to seek a full-time associate conference minister to supervise new church development and service the associations, reduce Sandra Mullins' time to half a week or so, and use "cluster leaders" in rural Alabama rather than replacing Warren Blankenhorn. This was a decided shift toward "mission" instead of "maintenance," to use a term employed by church growth experts.

The March 1990 meeting of the Board of Directors approved establishing a capital funds drive, to be known as "Visions '91," to raise up to \$200,000 for Conference needs. The aims of the drive were fivefold: (1) new church starts; (2) leadership training; (3) identity development; (4) relocation of the Conference headquarters; and (5) establishing an endowment fund for future use.

In April, the Board reported giving triple what it had remitted to national OCWM in 1989 and explored purchasing a 7 1/2-acre plot north of Atlanta for a possible new church start location (which was never undertaken; Church of the Savior in Alpharetta, Georgia presently serves that area).

The new Social Justice Commission proposed an active agenda of advocating for reproductive rights and environmental justice and against the death penalty, a tall order in the part of the country least supportive of such aims.

Janice Dandridge succeeded Kathy Foster as secretary and administrative assistant.

The Social Justice Commission made a dramatic debut with several resolutions during the 1990

Annual Meeting. The first called upon the church to meet the abortion issue with respect towards women and their choices to carry to term or not; the second called upon the U.S. Government to delay restarting the Savannah River Site nuclear facility in South Carolina to manufacture plutonium and titanium until its safety could be assured; the third called for an examination of capital punishment in the several Southern states of the Conference's territory; and the fourth called for funding to the El Salvadoran government's civil war against Communist forces to be eliminated by the U.S. Also at that meeting, delegates adopted a final draft of a new constitution for the SEC.

With two small, AMA-heritage churches, in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Macon, Georgia, in terminal decline, the Conference set its sights about helping the former relocate and the latter dissolve honorably. When the Chattanooga church refused the SEC's help, though, the Conference went about laying plans for a new, multi-racial, multi-cultural congregation instead, marking new, uncharted territory in church planting and development.

But the most noteworthy accomplishment of 1990 was the hiring of the Rev. Mitchell C. Johnson, an African-American UCC minister, as the associate conference minister. Johnson was a retired military chaplain who had been an interim pastor at the struggling Button Gwinnett UCC. More to the point, his hiring signified the realization of a dream deferred since the 1960s, to have a staff reflective of the racial diversity of the Conference.

In the year American forces invaded Kuwait to expel Saddam Hussein's Iraqi occupation, the Conference was very busy handling varied demands and pursuing multiple goals. In February, the Board of Directors approved support of a workshop on domestic violence, while seminars in planned giving would be conducted, a partnership with the Iowa Conference was proposed, and negotiations began about the possible conversion of the building of a long-defunct congregation, Center (not to be confused with *Central*) Congregational Church in northwestern Atlanta, to office space for the Conference to relocate to.

In the Spring, Sandra Mullins concluded her 10 years of service to the SEC in order to go into non-church-related work.

In what featured a visit by UCC President Paul Sherry, the 25th Annual Meeting took place in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Before the proceedings, a special service of commemoration took place in the Brainerd Mission Cemetery, the final resting place of missionaries who worked among Native American Cherokees in the region in the early 19th century. Congregationalists and Presbyterians worked together to evangelize and educate the Cherokees until the Federal Government forced them to leave for western territories around the 1830s, something known today as the "Trail of Tears."

In the meeting proper, delegates voted to prolong Visions '91 until the end of the year to pursue the \$200,000 challenge goal and approved several resolutions on social justice themes, including a potentially controversial one that, in its original text, called for the abolishment of nuclear power. The modified text instead called for caution in nuclear use and the development of alternative sources of energy.

Late in 1991, the United Church Board for World Ministries held its annual corporate meeting in Atlanta at a hotel, with Conference churches providing support personnel for hospitality and representation. This marked the first time that one of the UCC's major boards had ever held a meeting in Conference territory. Some 100 persons volunteered their efforts to make the meeting successful. In the words of UCBWM head Scott Libbey, "The Southeast Conference set an outstanding benchmark in the rich resource of a Conference assisting the 'happening' of a Board annual meeting."

Changes in late 1991 included a new name for Button Gwinnett UCC, changing to "Gwinnett Community UCC" in order to improve identity to bolster the failing church's fortunes and Alice Lawrence taking over from Janice Dandridge as administrative assistant. James Mason of United Church of Huntsville, Alabama became the chairman of a planned giving committee, to solicit wills and estates on the Conference's behalf.

Building upon a stand taken in the late 1970s, however, the East Alabama-West Georgia Association expressed its disapproval of a General Synod resolution in the summer of 1991 paving the way for gay and lesbian ordination. The statement read, "With careful searching of the scriptures we find no references where people openly living in sinful ways should be permitted to become our spiritual leaders." This staunch conservatism, rooted in rural mores and sanctification-minded/holiness doctrine derived from Wesleyan origins, would prove to be the beginning of the end of the accommodation that had ruled the Conference since its early days.

The somewhat unexpected outcome of deliberations with the remaining trustees of the long-dormant Center Congregational Church in Atlanta was that the church should be restarted instead of converted into Conference offices. On February 28, 1993 the first worship service was conducted, with a number of the original membership returning. Those individuals and others years later turned the congregation against the UCC, and due to a clause in its property deed requiring the church to be put to "Congregational" use, in 2006, the SEC sued Center Church to forestall its taking its property with it to the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. Unfortunately, Georgia courts found in favor of the church because of the fundamental legal distinction between denominations governed hierarchically and those with self-governing congregations, ruling that in the latter case, the church is free to affiliate with whatever body it pleases (and that, in effect, the NACCC is as much a legitimate successor to the Congregational tradition as is the UCC).

Two new, albeit ill-fated, churches would start up in mid-1992, one in Athens, Georgia that lasted only a few months, and the Sheares Memorial UCC in Chattanooga,

Tennessee, the SEC's first venture into multi-cultural worship and programming. Led by a recently-ordained African-American pastor, James Fother, the Sheares congregation, named for the recently-deceased head of OCLL, had a promising start but was hindered by misunderstandings in its relationships to the Conference and to the nearby Pilgrim Congregational Church and by little enthusiasm outside its founding core group. It closed about five years later.

And the East Alabama-West Georgia Association took its anti-gay stance to the arena of the Annual Meeting in 1992, with an expanded version of its standing resolution. Its rationale ran, "We are concerned that ministers filling our pulpit know God's Word and willingly adjust their life styles to its commands and graces ... We are amazed and shocked to read the enclosed resolution approved by the General Synod and being urged upon us ... we must boldly speak out and take a stand against such a resolution as it is so much against the scriptures."

Needless to say, with a number of the Conference's congregations strongly supportive of lesbian and gay ordination, the stage was set for potentially acrimonious debate and recriminations. Said the pastor of the Langdale, Alabama Congregational Christian Church, Herbert Young, "We believe that those who openly prefer to live in sin or engage in sinful activities should not be called to spiritual leadership in the church." In turn, a member of Knoxville, Tennessee's Church of the Savior remarked that justice and grace trumped Old Testament and Pastoral Epistle sexual taboos. One member of First Congregational Church in Atlanta took offense at comparisons between the movement to secure rights for gays and lesbians and the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. Since this dealt with a matter that was not at the time properly under the Conference's jurisdiction, ordination, which then was under control of the associations (meaning that the East Alabama-West Georgia Association could enforce its ban), a delegate proposed an alternate resolution that called for associations to study the matter and make up their own minds. This was not enough for proponents like Young, who exclaimed, "Don't do this to us. Just tell us one way or another what you think by voting on our resolution." The substitute measure passed 74 to 43, reflecting the most division the Conference had experienced since the waning days of the Vietnam War. For better or worse, this episode was a turning point, as a number of small, rural congregations opted for other denominations or independence, in many cases to simply cease receiving UCC literature mailed to their congregations, perhaps the only tie most of them had with the denomination.

Back to more mundane concerns, in September, the Conference hurriedly sought a new location for its headquarters and transferred a number of its independently managed funds to accounts with the United Church Foundation.

With the church at Macon, Georgia now officially closed and the property sold to a community center, the Conference developed plans for founding a new, multi-cultural church to take its place in Middle Georgia. Also, some of the Visions '91 money was set aside for a new African-American congregation in the eastern suburbs of Atlanta, in DeKalb County. A system of church clusters had been implemented for fellowship and support, with about half functioning as intended.

The start of 1993 saw the Conference finally obtain its first-ever home other than at Central Congregational Church, in the Lutheran Ministries of Georgia building on West Peachtree Street in Midtown (a space now owned by the Georgia Institute of Technology). The Christian Social Justice Commission announced a vigorous plan of action, including recruitment of strongly interested persons, facilitation of resolutions to meetings, processing applications for Neighbors in Need funds, and involvement with allocating resources toward organizations fighting hunger and militarism.

Around the time of the Annual Meeting, the SEC first heard a proposal by a member of Pleasant Grove Congregational Christian Church near LaFayette, Alabama to donate a portion of her farmland to the Conference to use as a camping and conference center, potentially satisfying what had been a "back-burner" dream for many years.

The Iowa-Southeast partnership began to develop with things like pulpit exchanges and work camps.

An Identity Task Force, similar to one that worked 20 years earlier, aimed to have the newsletter profile one particular church in each issue, to produce a brochure, to begin interviewing prominent figures from the Conference's past, and even to write a children's book. Most of its aims never got off the ground, though.

The new African-American church start was, in effect, relocated to southern Cobb County (northwest of the city of Atlanta) and became Amistad UCC, led by a charismatic preacher, the Rev. Flora Wilson-Bridges. It grew to above 100 members at one point before a division set in, and, later in the decade, Wilson-Bridges turned hostile against the UCC, which she implicated in some anti-white diatribes. Not surprisingly, Amistad Church fell apart by the end of the decade due to general instability.

Normalization of U.S. relations with Cuba, from both political and religious motivations, became important to certain people within the liberal wing of the Conference (and UCC), leading to a resolution for "Shalom" at the 1993 Annual Meeting. This document



condemned the tightening of the 30-year-old blockade and praised Church World Service for violating it to deliver food and medicine to needy Cubans. On the other side of the proverbial aisle, the East Alabama-West Georgia Association tried again to assert its anti-gay position, this time stated in the language of "Reaffirming Rights of Local Churches."

From October 28 through November 1, the corporate board of the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries met in Savannah, Georgia. Toward the end of the year, planning began for establishing a resource center for the entire Conference, another of the past dreams seeking realization in the new era of relative prosperity for the SEC. And, despite having just concluded a capital funds drive in the Conference itself with Visions '91, some congregations participated in the national UCC "Make A Difference" campaign, an initiative with a \$30 million goal.

The early part of 1994, however, brought sad news in the closing of Gwinnett Community UCC in Lilburn, Georgia. The 16-year-old congregation never realized its full potential, despite being in one of the nation's fastest-growing areas, having built a structure the small membership really could not afford. Psychologically, this marked a turning point of sorts of SEC policy away from "parachute-drop" suburban plants (although the other one of the 1970s, Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia, *did* survive) among hard-to-enlist conservative or transient residents and toward underserved constituencies—African-Americans, young urbanites, gays and lesbians, for example—more amenable to the UCC's basic message of inclusion and progressive social stances.

Meanwhile, the Board of Directors established policy for the Christian Social Justice Commission to disburse Conference shares of funds collected in the Just Peace and Hunger Action offerings, on an annual cycle, and the Commission started a short-lived network to coordinate concerns among the churches.

The Iowa-Southeast partnership bore fruit in a scheduled work camp in July and exchange of conference ministers at each body's respective meeting in June.

Talk began in earnest of hiring a part-time Christian Education and/or youth leader.

The conference minister in Florida, Charles Burns, consulted with the SEC about management and office matters, suggesting a toll-free telephone number, an extensive computer setup, and using a cluster system to implement fellowship and mission.

The Columbia, South Carolina new church start, dormant for some years prior, was re-activated.

The associations, although playing perhaps a smaller role in church life than in the past, were nonetheless active in the latter part of 1994. The Georgia-South Carolina Association's Social Justice Commission staged a workshop in October to demonstrate constructive ways of responding to the then-recent rise of racist and paramilitary groups. The Alabama-Tennessee Association held a weekend-long session on "dealing with conflict within the local church constructively."

Two new staff members joined the SEC in late 1994, Rhonda Fowler (briefly) as administrative assistant and Tim Klein, youth director. Klein had long supervised a very successful youth program in his home congregation, St. John's UCC in Cullman, Alabama. Also, the Conference began to engage in a new dimension of ministry through the volunteering of Anne Ariail, wife of the pastor of the Macon, Georgia new church start. Mrs. Ariail specialized in disaster relief, delivering goods and services to areas devastated by floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, or other such weather-related dislocations and property destruction; her work was prompted by flooding in central and southwestern Georgia during the summer of 1994.

The Conference began to explore the ramifications of sexual misconduct by clergy by creating a committee to develop guidelines for handling such cases, which typically require more delicate and thorough investigation than other kinds of offenses. Legal liability issues also forced attention to this otherwise unsavory topic.

On November 19, Brookmeade Congregational Church in Nashville became the first church in the entire Conference to adopt the "Open and Affirming" platform of the UCC Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns, meaning that it declared itself totally welcoming toward people of all sexual persuasions. At the time, it was only the 145th UCC congregation nationally to take this step. As of 2016, 21 Conference congregations now declare themselves "ONA."

In December, Nan Wright became the administrative assistant, one who would serve during a transition in leadership. By early 1995, Roger Knight had put in six and a half years of hard work and likely experienced relatively little intrinsic reward for it, as OCWM giving always seemed to run behind, rural churches kept withdrawing one by one, and churches could not be persuaded to communicate better with each other and the Conference. He decided, after nearly a quarter century in denominational and judicatory work, to return to the pastorate, taking the pulpit of Euclid Avenue Congregational UCC (now South Euclid UCC) in Cleveland, Ohio. To the Board of Directors in March, Knight stated a "disappointment at not being able to hold together certain parts of the Conference and ... pain from the loss of churches because of the

loss of connectedness. He felt that he was not able to 'pastor' because there was so much structural organization to be done. His biggest disappointment was that there (was) no youth program yet."

Edwin Mehlhaff, who had consulted with the SEC on stewardship matters in the late 1970s, was chosen interim conference minister. But a controversy arose when the interim search committee also recommended that Mitchell Johnson's position be terminated immediately in order to implement a new, three-person, one-third-time apiece associate staff configuration. Johnson, obviously dismayed when the motion carried, said, "I selfishly question the timing and the rationale behind what appears to me to be the results of a somewhat hasty telephone conference decision." With the "will of the Annual Conference" and the support of the Board of Directors, though, Johnson was allowed to continue working through January 1996.

Things moved ahead during Mehlhaff's one year of service to the Conference. The Conference took decisive steps to go ahead and develop a retreat center in eastern Alabama from the land gift of Lala Allen. With the reception of over \$250,000 from the national "Make A Difference" campaign, there was enough confidence among Board members and other interested people to make the dream a reality.

The 1995 Annual Meeting, held at a United Methodist retreat center northeast of Atlanta, saw a report from an *ad hoc* Structure Committee, which read in part:

As a Conference, we should emphasize the personal, the fellowship and the gatherings of this wonderfully diverse and gifted people ... We should use a Faith-Works model every two years for the gathering of as many of our 7,500 members of our churches as is possible for inspiration, fellowship, education and planning ... We should create a working council (based on a cluster model to complement associational representation) ... We should emphasize communication ... The program chairs should carry the lead in the development of program planning at Faith-Works ... it is also suggested that Associations also structure their program bodies to conform to this design ... the council should elect from among its members committees necessary for the maintenance and oversight of the Conference office ... The Conference should maintain the role of the conference minister ... The Conference should emphasize growth and expansion in areas where the UCC would be a breath of fresh air among people seeking a church home ... The Board should select a Constitution and By-laws committee ... to propose changes required by these recommendations ... The Board should establish a method for achieving agreement with National for staffing assistance.

Early 1996 witnessed the approval of an exploratory study for a possible UCC start in the far southern suburbs of Atlanta, at Peachtree City, Georgia, as well as funding for developing congregations in Macon, Georgia and Columbia, South Carolina.

Meanwhile, in March, the Board of Directors decided to send proposed constitutional changes to the associations for review and have the 1997 Annual Meeting vote on them, rather than at the 1996 meeting as originally planned.

Because things were so mundane, little did anyone envision in 1996 that, less than ten years later, the Conference would be in the midst of unprecedented growth and would even go so far as to host General Synod, things quite impossible in earlier years.

## **5. FROM STRUGGLE TO TRIUMPH, 1996-2005**

Easily the biggest story from the spring of 1996 was the selection of a nominee for the permanent conference minister position. The Rev. Dr. Timothy Campbell Downs, then pastor of St. John's UCC in Allentown, Pennsylvania, was chosen. He was elected by the Annual Meeting convened at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, an Episcopalian institution. With a keen sense of organization and efficiency, Downs proved to be, over a 17-year tenure in office, the most effective leader the Conference had ever experienced. The references solicited during the search process described him as "... as outstanding leader ... combines strong conviction with a willingness and ability to listen well to others ... blessed with a sense of humor that puts tension in perspective ... maintains and encourages respect for church tradition and the history out of which folks come ... a person of prodigious energy and balanced judgment, a humane but decisive administrator, and a spiritual leader who—is able to speak the truth in love." Tim Downs was the son of Presbyterian missionaries to Thailand but was educated in the U.S. and ordained in 1974, serving churches in New England and Pennsylvania for 22 years thereafter.

Because of the immense public infrastructure for the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic Games preventing feasible transportation in the metropolitan area, Downs' arrival was postponed until after the Games concluded, and the office was closed for that two-week period.

With UCBHM rejecting the new church start proposal for Peachtree City, Georgia, the Conference took an attitude that "there are churches that are struggling and need Conference support now and it would be imprudent to ignore this reality," in effect concurring with UCBHM's prejudice against financing congregations in smaller markets, especially in what was a conservative exurb of Atlanta. The SEC also issued a "make it or break it" ultimatum to the Heart of Georgia Fellowship in Macon, another indication of the Conference's declining confidence towards local leaders who seemed to believe themselves entitled to handouts while they pursued improbable church start dreams.

One interesting mission project was carried out by several UCC members working on behalf of a Lineville, Alabama-based ministry that conducted work camps in Venezuela doing construction and medical work. This was supported also by the Commission on Women in Church and Society of the SEC.

Many Conference members eagerly supported a nation-wide teleconference on "Freedom of Conscience and the Religious Right."

The Disaster Relief ministry of the SEC turned its attention toward a number of African-American churches that had been destroyed by arsonists, working to rebuild one in Estill, South Carolina.

The pastor of First United Church in Belvidere, Tennessee, Karl Whiteman, and wife Jan, were commissioned as missionaries by UCBWM to Micronesia and the Marshall Islands and spent several years there.

In 1996, several disaffected members of First Congregational Christian Church in Montgomery, Alabama, disagreeing with the decision of the majority to rebuild on the site after a fire destroyed the sanctuary the previous year, opted to relocate to another area of the city and form Community Congregational Church, led by the Rev. Bennie R. Liggins, an Air Force chaplain. This would become the first truly successful African-American new church start in the SEC's history.

As for the proposed retreat center in Chambers County, Alabama, funds were coming in, and plans were begun on constructing a pavilion and a caretaker's residence. Most of the support generally came, not surprisingly, from individuals and churches in the East Alabama-West Georgia Association. The Church and Ministry Committee of the Conference also laid plans to begin a full crisis-response team to deploy to congregations victimized by clergy sexual misconduct. The Iowa-Southeast partnership was looking ahead toward helping Habitat for Humanity build a house for a mother of four and grandmother of three in Tunica, Mississippi.

Early in 1997, Downs in effect talked the Board of Directors out of previous plans to restructure the Conference, putting forward these questions:

"Why do we want to restructure? Board stated that Conference considered restructuring as a means to conserve financial resources and to provide better communication/ community between the members of the wider church ... What went wrong? ... The Board stated: the foundation for restructuring was wrong; we need to be more organic; the relationship between associations and clusters is unclear; the Conference/ Associations/Churches are still not used to the last restructuring; the need to organize task groups around areas of interest seems to be important."

Thus, the entire work of the previous two years was tabled, with the 1988-90 Constitution and Bylaws held in effect.

The Board decided upon splitting the duties of administrative assistant into a separate full-time position and another part-time one, with the former taking on primarily data and financial responsibilities, while the latter assisted with the staff itself in coordination

of each member with the tasks at hand. Seeking UCBHM financial assistance, the SEC proposed three one-third-time positions in "Spiritual Development and Community Building," "Congregational Renewal and Development," and "Mission Development and Identity."

By the time of the 1997 Annual Meeting, a new administrative assistant had been hired, Geraldine "Gerri" Ryons-Hudson, who went on to become the longest-tenured employee in Conference history, until financial problems and technological redundancy forced the elimination of her position in February 2016.

The Spiritual Development and Community Building position was given to a seminarian at Atlanta's Candler School of Theology of Emory University, Joyce Hollyday, who had for years written books and articles for *Sojourners* magazine about topics relating to the fields of spirituality, justice advocacy, and the ways in which they intertwine to provide a foundation for mission. The Congregational Renewal and Development position went to a former pastor in New England, Fred Coulter, who was based out of Knoxville, Tennessee.

The end of the Annual Meeting witnessed the Conference receiving the title to the property of the land donated by Lala Allen for the Allen Retreat Center in eastern Alabama.

In August, Downs nominated the Rev. Richard Sales, the recently-retired pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Birmingham, as the Mission Development and Identity staff person. As mentioned above, Sales was a talented teacher and former missionary in Botswana and South Africa who specialized in theological education by extension to benefit ministerial candidates who could not attend traditional theological seminaries due to personal situations or other extenuating circumstances. Sales would use his time in office to develop a modified version of TEE for use in the SEC, intended especially for its smaller congregations who employed part-time clergy who, like their counterparts abroad, had no opportunity to further their theological education otherwise. The program, launched in 1999, was called "Theology Among the People," or "TAP" for short; Sales created a parallel version for the Alabama-Northwest Florida Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to address clergy shortages in that judicatory.

With most of the 1990s new church starts not having gotten beyond core groups in terms of membership, the Conference decided to basically abandon them and start afresh. Only Community Congregational Church in Montgomery, Alabama would survive from that period as a full-fledged congregation.

To help existing churches, Fred Coulter devised a program called "Covenant for Renewal" that was a tailor-made enrichment plan for any congregation wishing to develop any or all aspects of its life in positive ways. Due to an unresolved disciplinary proceeding in his former conference, Coulter resigned his position in early 1998, which was filled on an interim, part-time basis by the Rev. John Mingus, pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Mingus would actually implement the "Covenant for Renewal" in several Conference congregations.

A student-in-care, Cheri Lovell, was working with the Conference to improve the newsletter and develop a website to deliver news to the churches more quickly and effectively.

Joyce Hollyday said she had contacted clergy in order to determine "spiritual needs, (extend an) invitation for prayer concerns, (and offer) signs of hope and community-building." Also, she began work on what was to become the "Rekindle the Gift" historical project that would record the stories and accounts of people who were members of the African-American congregations in the Conference descended from the American Missionary Association. All in all, Downs' second year in office witnessed drastic changes in the scope and type of services to the SEC's churches and clergy away from the structural preoccupations of the Knight years into a more proactive, forward mode that sat rather lightly to traditional ecclesiastical concerns.

One priority during 1998 was to establish a firm set of guidelines for the investigation of sexual misconduct by clergy. This would be accompanied by mandatory boundary training for clergy.

Meanwhile, several conservative churches in the Conference were either leaving the UCC or considering doing so, such as St. John's UCC in Cullman, Alabama, expressed by a desire to switch associations from Alabama-Tennessee to East Alabama-West Georgia. In fact, the Conference vice-moderator, Jimmy Pilkington of United Congregational Christian Church in LaGrange, Georgia, actually supported his church's departure from the UCC, something that had to be disheartening to the remaining loyal leadership. And yet another church, United Christian Church in Crossville, Tennessee, which was a union congregation with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), closed due to an old-fashioned split over a building program. But to replace the departing churches, some new prospects were coming into view in the spring of 1998, such as a revival of African-American work in southern DeKalb County, Georgia (which would become New Life UCC); a former AME congregation in Decatur, Georgia; and Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta. The latter congregation was a liberal



white church of Southern Baptist heritage but then a member of the breakaway Alliance of Baptists, formed in the late 1980s as a protest against the parent denomination's increasingly rigid fundamentalism.

The four association Church and Ministry committees met together in March to discuss collaboration that would include developing clergy compensation guidelines, periodic reviews, continuing education events and retreats, and psychological evaluations.

The Disaster Relief unit of the Conference helped rebuild burned churches in Birmingham and in Perry, Georgia.

At the 1998 Annual Meeting, the Commission on Christian Social Justice drafted a letter expressing horror and sympathy to the family of an African-American man from Texas who had been decapitated by hanging from a pickup truck. The Allen Retreat Center was stuck in the preliminary phase due to a shortage of money to build a pavilion.

In the midst of all the flurry of the above activities, though, lay a "white elephant in the room" in the form of gay and lesbian rights and the UCC's reputation of defending them. In the February-March 1999 newsletter, Conference Minister Tim Downs wrote:

The ministers of the East Alabama/West Georgia Association gathered for dinner on January 19 to discuss the recent pastoral letter written by United Church of Christ President Paul Sherry, entitled, 'Now No Condemnation.' Rev. Sherry wrote the letter after the brutal killing of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming ...

This pastoral letter, sent to every congregation in the United Church of Christ, has stirred a considerable response, both positive and negative, within the lives of many of our congregations. I was glad to be part of the gathering in LaGrange, Ga., at which ministers from throughout the EAL/WGA Association offered their candor, their convictions, their prayers, and their hopes. The purpose of my letter is not to reflect on the merits of different convictions concerning the role and place of gay and lesbian people within the life of the Christian church. It is rather to reflect with you on the issue of how it is we are to gather with deeply differing convictions on the matter of the authority and voice of scripture on issues related to homosexuality, the historical testimony of the Christian church to this issue throughout the centuries, and our own faith convictions rooted in our experience and our personal discernment guided by the Holy Spirit.

... In the Southeast Conference in recent years, there have been deep wounds inflicted by harsh and intolerant statements made on all sides of the issues. There are some, as was evident in our meeting on January 19, who remain wounded by such intolerance.

... Some feel that the United Church of Christ has been led by an agenda that is driven by current and fashionable issues, instead of by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Others, equally committed to the Gospel, have a markedly different view of bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to bear faithfully on current issues of justice.

Some celebrate that we are in an exciting time of exploration, openness, and renewal in the Southeast Conference. Others feel that we are courting our own destruction.

... Some have suggested that we should not talk. I would urge us to continue to talk; but our conversation needs to be guided by a Christly spirit of forbearance and rise out of a depth of authenticity and integrity ...

That same issue carried an article by a member of Pilgrimage UCC in Marietta, Georgia titled "Countering the Far-Right" that stated, "No one want to create a mirror image of the conspiratorial theories and 'red-baiting' of the radical Right; but ignoring or refusing to understand this segment of American thought and goals allows these beliefs and hatreds to be passed from generation to generation, until they may someday arise in even more powerful ways." By these sights, the very homophobia Downs was trying to deal with was being declared evil by a layperson. The days of balancing ideologies and constituencies within the Southeast Conference were indeed fast approaching their end—in a few short years, they would end entirely, thanks in no small part to staunch liberal activism and the continuing polarization of Christianity in the U.S.

At the beginning of 1999, the final year of the millennium, the Conference placed its resource center in the premises of First Congregational Church in Atlanta. With an increased budget from years past, Tim Downs remarked in April, "It is clear that we as a Conference are sailing into deeper waters financially, and that we trust that our faithful stewardship has given us a vessel sufficient to the challenges before us." Permission was given by the Board of Directors to go ahead and build a pavilion on the site of the proposed Allen Retreat Center. The Rekindle the Gift program developed a mission statement as it sought to begin its work through research at several libraries and later visits to the AMA churches themselves to record oral stories related by their older generations of members.

In the new church start department, the Conference had called a pastor for an African-American congregation to be established in Stone Mountain, Georgia (New Life UCC); another African-American one to be located in LaGrange, Georgia (Community Congregational UCC), on the premises of Hillside Christian Church, then in the process of closing; and a truly pioneering one in midtown Atlanta that became the Conference's first church to explicitly target a constituency of those professing

alternative sexual orientation. The latter took the name "God, Self, and Neighbor Ministries" and was pastored by Kathi Martin, formerly of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

At the 1999 Annual Meeting, held at United Church of Huntsville, Alabama, resolutions were presented that opposed tax money being used to support private schools, supported the UCC's attempts to persuade the U.S. Government to normalize relations with Cuba, and supported the United Nations Association of the U.S.A.'s work in trying to remove unexploded military land mines throughout the world.

One way the Conference sought to meet its programmatic needs financially was applying for grants. Tim Downs and others would write many proposals during 1999 and the early 2000s for a variety of purposes, ranging from new church starts to the Disaster Relief operation to the TAP courses.

The Conference's stances toward justice for African-Americans extended even to the point of determining a location for the 2000 Annual Meeting. Originally, plans were made to hold the gathering in Charleston, South Carolina. But with the State of South Carolina intransigently continuing to fly the Confederate Flag on the grounds of the state capitol in Columbia, which had been protested for years by the NAACP, the SEC decided to honor the organization's boycott of the state and opted to hold the meeting at Community Congregational Church in Montgomery, Alabama instead. The matter would not be resolved until 2015 after the murder of several Charleston African-American church members by a racist young white man caused attitudes to drastically shift in favor of removal.

The first meeting of the Board of Directors in the new millennium brought about a long-delayed "aha!" moment of sorts when the Conference treasurer, Brad Pruitt, commented:

"Are we comfortable legally with money from closings versus wills, etc.? Assets from properties closed were done with a handshake for money to be used for new church starts in those areas. Nothing was done formally. What is our ethical obligation to use that money for new church starts in other areas? Verbal and handshake agreements were made with Macon (Georgia) for \$90,000, another for \$45,000. The Massachusetts Conference will be sending us \$100,000 from their capital campaign; another \$50,000 may be coming from them. New church development now has solid money in it. We need to plan it wisely."

By wise planning, Pruitt put forward a hypothetical demand for documentation and legal backing for each NCS project, something Downs implemented from that point

forward. It proved to be a very wise course of action indeed a few years later in the total collapse of one of the promising starts of this period, New Life UCC, which defaulted on its building mortgage.

Other matters included a declaration that the TAP program in and of itself was not considered an alternative to seminary education by the associations' church and ministry committees, Downs announcing that he was teaching a history and polity course for students at the Atlanta-area theological seminaries (which had been taught at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville for decades and to Atlanta-area students on an as-needed basis), and that he had been in conversation with Korean- and Spanish-speaking pastors about the potential of establishing congregations to serve such constituencies. The Korean one, the Rev. Kwan-Hae Chi, eventually started Open Community UCC, an alternative to the authoritarian Korean-American Christian style of leadership found in the mainly Presbyterian churches in the Atlanta area. DeKalb and Gwinnett counties in Georgia especially were home to the second-largest community of immigrant and second-generation Koreans in the U.S., only behind Los Angeles. A few years later, another Korean church, Salim UCC, was attempted in northern Fulton County, but without success.

According to director Dick Sales, the TAP program had no fewer than five active groups meeting throughout the Conference territory, something that surprised him and others and overwhelmed his capacity to actually prepare the curriculum materials. He also planned a convocation for the geographically disparate meetings to gather, in or around the time of the Conference Annual Meeting.

By spring, a new bookkeeper was hired to "make the budget easier to read" and participate in an upcoming audit of financial records; the Allen Retreat Center was making progress on its attempts to construct the first edifice on its grounds; Joyce Hollyday was resuming her interviews of members of AMA-founded African-American congregations and would need large grants in order to finish her objective of writing a book about the subject; the TAP program had grown to the point where Richard Sales was driving some 1200 miles per quarter to teach and/or service the several groups that were meeting to study the Bible and leadership courses; the Disaster Relief unit, now headed by Willard Rabert of Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, helped to clean up after a tornado in southern Georgia; and several ambassadors from the UCC's ecumenical partner in Germany, the Evangelical Churches of the Union, visited the SEC to learn about American methods of stewardship and financial giving, an imperative in the face of secularization-derived decline in worship attendance and state subsidies there.

As the Conference Minister put it in the January-February issue of the Conference newsletter:

"... We recognize that the manner in which we have trained ministers in the past is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of ministry in our congregations. We also recognize that the old manner of starting churches no longer serves to establish congregations that are likely to live into a new and vibrant future ... I believe that the Southeast Conference is beginning to undertake a challenging and exciting task of reshaping its ministries so that it can effectively meet the needs of our congregations and our ministers."

A decision made at the March Board meeting to disallow resolutions from the delegate floor of Annual Meeting did not sit well with some, particularly those who were strong advocates of social justice causes. As such, prior to the Annual Meeting, the Board agreed to review that decision against previous policies and come up with a compromise between the two.

At the meeting itself, the Conference received a check for \$100,000 from the Massachusetts Conference, part of the proceeds from that conference's capital campaign, for the purpose of starting new churches.

Meanwhile, one new church started in June 2000 that would finally realize the Conference's long-held goal of a faith community inclusive of both white and African-American cultures in worship and ministering faithfully to both communities. Beloved Community Church, adopting the name of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phrase for the bridging of the races in American life, started worship in Birmingham in June under the leadership of the Rev. Angela Wright, who was also known as a community organizer working for social justice advocacy groups such as Alabama ARISE and others. Beloved Community Church would prove, unlike the efforts in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Macon, Georgia in the 1990s, to endure beyond the initial enthusiasm of a core group and actually develop fully into a congregation, thanks in no small part to Wright's keen pastoral sensibilities and talents for relating human needs to solutions. Wright remained Beloved Community's pastor until early 2016.

Moving ahead to a year that would witness profound and indelible changes to American life unimaginable by even the scaremongers who warned Americans that massive technological failure would occur on January 1, 2000, the first Board of Directors meeting in 2001 witnessed the emergence of Kathy Clark, then an in-care student of the Georgia-South Carolina Association, as the new administrator of the TAP program. By that point, several cohorts were meeting, including the possibility of one for metropolitan Atlanta.

Not all news was positive, though, as the South Alabama-Northwest Florida Association had been reduced to only two congregations, as the third one, Antioch Congregational Christian Church near Andalusia, Alabama, withdrew in order to change to the Baptist faith. After that point, the association stopped meeting on an annual basis and began relating loosely to the East Alabama-West Georgia Association instead, and the two churches remain on the Conference roll today, although neither relates closely to the Conference or the UCC as was hoped for at the time.

Still, on the Conference level, things were progressing along nicely. A “YouthFest” gathering in Anniston, Alabama brought together 54 young people and 20 adult advisors. There was the possibility of a work camp to take place in Cuba in 2002. In conjunction with the Annual Meeting, the Georgia-South Carolina Association admitted Church of the Savior in Roswell, Georgia, a congregation of Southern Baptist background and also a member of the Alliance of Baptists, into its membership, creating a new stream of traditions into the Conference’s lifeblood.

Life progressed along until one Tuesday morning in September, the 11th day of the month. As terrorist-hijacked planes flew into the twin towers of New York’s World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a field in Pennsylvania, Americans took a collective gasp of horror, fell into deep shock, and adopted an attitude of hyper-patriotism in response. As might be expected, reaction from some Conference representatives was more reflective and nuanced, as found in the Winter 2001 issue of the newsletter.

Conference Minister Tim Downs:

... this Advent is a different Advent for me ... We have wanted to respond with urgency, to rush to justice, to claim our revenge, to rip the perpetrators from their hiding places and bring them before the full light of our anger ... Many of us have been touched by the death and mayhem of September 11. Many of us weep in our prayers and cry out, ‘Why?’ Many of us take some satisfaction that there has been a response in Afghanistan, its effectiveness or the suffering it has caused among civilians being secondary to our satisfaction that something is being done. I ask you in this Advent season to wait upon the Lord, to walk through this season gently and prayerfully ... I invite you to walk calmly amidst the chaos and cacophony of voices around us, to proceed prayerfully amidst the beat of drums and the cries of warfare.

The Rev. Angela Wright, pastor of Beloved Community Church in Birmingham:

... There are reasons that people from poor countries across the globe hate our country. Some of those reasons have to do with ways that our government is perceived to have wielded its wealth and power. Some of the reasons have to do with ways that multinational corporations—viewed as U.S. corporations—are perceived to have wielded

their wealth and power. Some of the reasons we may understand and some we may not. But we need to listen to them. And when we hear legitimate cries for freedom, justice and self-determination—the things we hold so dear—we need to respond. Until we do, I fear, violence and terror will only escalate. Our lives and our hopes for peace and security depend on whether we listen and how we respond to what we hear.

The Rev. Dr. John W. Mingus, Sr., pastor of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee:

Two dominant theological themes are emerging from this tragedy. One I find in groups such as our Interfaith colleagues, the UCC, and other mainline groups. It is an affirmation of God's presence with us in the midst of tragedy, with calls for justice and peace. The second is quite disturbing, but very strong in the conservative circles that shape the culture of places such as Chattanooga. In this second theme, it can not be conceived that such as tragedy could have happened unless God had allowed it to happen. This theme usually blames September 11 on homosexuals, abortion, pornography, the lack of prayer in the schools, a secular (and sinful) society. This is in my mind blasphemy and needs to be named as such. This response is producing increasing pressure to discriminate and to act on these issues.

Churches took up special offerings for those affected by the bombings, held interfaith meetings, conducted prayer services with local officials, and made, in some cases for the first time, efforts to study Islam as a legitimate world religion. The aftereffects of the bombing, though, would impact significantly the witness for peace that the SEC and some of its churches bore through an intensification and urgency that quickened the faith of some while eroding it at a more rapid pace for the conservative faction of the Conference, already in steep decline due to GLBT issues.

But the stances for justice and peace proved highly attractive to an African-American megachurch looking for a denominational home. Victory For The World Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia, was founded as a Baptist congregation in 1987 and had grown to over 5,000 members by the turn of the millennium. Its dynamic and forceful pastor, Kenneth Samuel, began conversations with Tim Downs and other leaders about affiliation with the UCC, talks that would take place over the next year or so.

Said the representatives for new church development during a program planning meeting in October: "... The process of developing new church starts has been intentional. It has also been contextual; that is to say, there is no formula. We feel that we have been strongly supported by the national church, although we noted that the national staff has been mixed in skill level in working with new church starts ..." Some goals and objectives included encouragement of fellowship among the new churches and with older and established churches and training to write grants to help raise

money. Likewise, the Church and Ministry Commission resolved to apply national guidelines toward situations where established churches sought UCC affiliation.

The Christian Social Justice Commission was working on adopting minefields for removal, further cementing an ecumenical bond with the Protestant churches of Cuba, and the Jubilee program of persuading the U.S. government to release "Third World" nations from their indebtedness to America, to encourage economic development in those lands.

To begin 2002, the Conference hired its first youth leader in nearly ten years in the person of Betsy Taylor Flory, with a number of grants funding her position.

Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia, which had been affiliated with the Congregational Christian Churches until the 1950s when it was removed from the national roster of colleges and universities due to a race-related controversy, announced that it was interested in renewing ties and affiliating with the UCC's higher education council. It had, and continued to maintain, membership in the "continuing" National Association of Continuing Congregational Churches in lieu of UCC affiliation throughout the years. More recently, Piedmont has graciously provided a place for Annual Meetings of the Conference, in the mid-2010s.

During a sabbatical in the summer of 2002, Tim Downs would study new church development thanks to a grant from the Institute of the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kentucky.

Other news included the near-completion of the pavilion at the Allen Retreat Center. Bennie Liggins' aggressive efforts at evangelism took the form of a program in April, with the hope of several (mainly African-American) churches entering the UCC from independence or other denominations.

Joyce Hollyday had completed interviewing about 10 of the 15 AMA congregations and resigned as editor of the Conference newsletter in order to focus her attention on writing a book based on *Rekindle the Gift* and the AMA story.

The TAP program was operating at full capacity, having spilled over into the Georgia Region of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the East Alabama-West Georgia Association, and the Conference sought funding to hire Kathy Clark on a full-time basis.

About the only thing that was problematic around this period was financial reporting, which an audit revealed. Wrote the auditors: "Your assets are increasing in comparison



to liabilities—looks very good. Issues: Our investments are down in value; annual meeting expenses are exceeding income; there had to be a major accounting adjustment made due to inability to reconcile expense and income items on the daily accounting. The issue here is accounting classifications, which have not been followed regularly, leading to great confusion.” This “ineptness, not misappropriation” went back to 2000, and the Board voted to terminate its bookkeeping service in favor of another to clean up the disarray.

The 2002 Annual Meeting, held at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Georgia, had a leadership convocation conducted by Walter Brueggemann of the nearby Columbia Theological Seminary (and a clergy member of the Georgia-South Carolina Association), a full program for young people, and the admission of two congregations into the Georgia-South Carolina Association, Victory For The World Church in Stone Mountain and Virginia-Highland Church in Atlanta. With the departure of St. John’s Evangelical Protestant Church in Cullman, Alabama from the UCC a short time earlier, Victory became the Conference’s largest congregation by a large margin, and in fact, the second largest in the entire denomination, behind only Trinity UCC in Chicago. In the only known reelection of a conference minister held in the SEC’s history, Tim Downs received another six-year term by an overwhelming vote (the reelection provision and two-term limit would be abolished in the 2007 revision of the constitution and bylaws).

At the Board meeting preceding the Annual Meeting, the first mention was made of the UCC possibly holding its 2005 General Synod in Atlanta, from UCC Office of General Ministries Vice-President Edith Guffey. The new bookkeeper, Michael LaBounty, announced that he would implement a direct deposit payroll and that the new churches helped to increase incoming OCWM levels. The SEC was awaiting approval of a Lilly Endowment grant for funding of new churches and the TAP program.

In July, Youth from the Southeast, Southern, and Florida conferences gathered at the Epworth-by-the-Sea retreat center on St. Simons Island, Georgia for a Regional Youth Event titled “Many Gifts, One Spirit.” In addition to the traditional mainstays such as bull sessions, talent shows, and the like, there was an environmental component: “At the driftwood Nature Center, we built new enclosures for injured or rehabilitating birds. Others of us learned to seine in the surf and then examined the wildlife living where the land meets the sea. Interestingly, we found that in nature, ecology requires diversity!”

Leaders of the Conference attended a “National Ministry Issues Consultation” conducted by the Parish Life and Leadership division of Local Church Ministries (which

the former Board for Homeland Ministries became after the 1999 national restructuring). The Winter 2002 issue of the SEC newsletter reported:

One of the major themes to engage from this consultation is the need for the entire church to revisit the preparation of ministers for ordained ministry. The insightful conversations experienced will lead us to explore the development of multiple tracks to ordained ministry, including but not limited to traditional seminary training. This holds profound implications for ministry through the Southeast Conference. Through the years the conference has found it difficult to find and train ordained ministers, particularly in small rural and often isolated churches.

The Board of Directors, at its November meeting, decided to go ahead and invite General Synod 25 to meet at Atlanta's Georgia World Congress Center in July 2005, with a pledge of \$20,000 as the Conference's share of expenses. Also, Betsy Flory said that she was planning a series of youth retreats. The Disaster Assistance Relief Team announced it would hold a training event in March 2003, in cooperation with the Florida Conference of the UCC and the Lutheran Ministries of Georgia organization.

A couple of months later, the Board found the Conference's scheduled 2003 budget at \$96,000 more expenses than income. The Board held a belief that this was due to congregations encountering "major non-recurring expenses" and declining investment returns that precluded OCWM giving, not stinginess on the churches' part. The Board also authorized an *ad hoc* task force to address rewriting the SEC's constitution and bylaws. To handle the heavy load of writing applications for grants, a member of Community Congregational Church in Montgomery, Alabama, Dorian Ross, was retained by the Conference to seek funding for the TAP, Rekindle the Gift and youth programs.

In March, the Conference underwent these developments: Kathy Clark was about to go full-time as the director of TAP; a new congregation in Cookeville, Tennessee was declared a new church start and would seek membership in the Alabama-Tennessee Association; a group was gathering in southwestern Atlanta that would eventually begin Sankofa UCC, a theologically and culturally Afro-centric project; and New Life UCC's building was bought by the SEC for holding until the church was ready and able to purchase it for itself. The latter, unfortunately, never happened, due to numerous failures to pay on the mortgage and the congregation eventually dissolving as a result. The Conference would recoup the loss and actually gain some money on the resale, in addition to lessons learned about where—and if—trust should be placed.

Summertime witnessed the TAP program continuing to grow, with 10 cohorts meeting throughout the territory. By the time of Annual Meeting, 15 people representing

several groups were ready to graduate, and did so at a special ceremony presided over by UCC President John Thomas. A scholarship fund was set up in the name of Dick Sales for those wishing financial assistance to enroll as students. Also, parallel versions of TAP were created for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) regions in Alabama-Northwest Florida and Georgia.

In response to U.S. preparations for war in Iraq, Tim Downs remarked, "As Christians, we are called to be signs of God's peace and healing where the world is broken and torn. Our efforts should be marked at each step by an unceasing prayer for all those in harm's way. As surely as God shows no partiality or favoritism toward any of God's children, so should our prayers be for all ... Our faith calls us to lift up the awareness that our nation is part of a fabric of humanity and nations rich and complex in their diversity, yet called to live in peace, in the light of freedom and justice." Downs went on to promote the Olive Branch Appeal to address the humanitarian crisis brought on by the U.S. embargo and internal problems of the Iraqi state.

In July, 12 young people and five adult mentors went on a mission trip to Juarez, Mexico to build a house, a *la* Habitat for Humanity, for a single mother and her children.

August saw the first meeting of an *ad hoc* committee to revise the constitution and bylaws of the SEC took place, seeking to address the "changing nature of the Conference and its four Associations." The members would explore the foundations of the organization and its rooting in the balance between autonomy and covenant. The process was expected to take about two to three years.

In an article for the January-February 2004 edition of the newsletter, Kathy Clark talked about "Developing Leadership for the Emerging UCC." Excerpts:

What does the emerging United Church of Christ look like? According to Rev. Dr. Timothy Downs, Conference Minister of the Southeast Conference, the emerging UCC in the Southeast is 'profoundly diverse and eclectic,' and provides a moderate to liberal voice on theological, ethical, and social issues in an area of the United States where few such alternate voices exist ... more than half of the members of UCC churches are African American and, while the sizes of our churches range from more than 5000 to less than 50, the majority of our churches have less than 100 members.

Sixty percent of our churches are pastored by bi-vocational ministers, many of whom are licensed and have been 'non-traditionally' trained. The Conference continues to grow by the addition of new members in established congregations, by welcoming new churches, and by nurturing new church starts. Most churches that find their way to us are

attracted by our liberal stances and our new church starts are organized around principles of social justice and a gospel sense of radical inclusivity.

The Southeast Conference is reflective of growing trends throughout the wider church, according to Rev. Lynn Bujnak, Ministerial Formation Coordinator of the UCC Parish Life and Leadership Ministry Team. Nationally, the majority of new church starts are multi-cultural, multi-racial, open and affirming, and accessible to all. The UCC of the future is radically inclusive, profoundly hospitable, and dares to risk 'respectability' for the sake of witnessing faithfully to the gospel.

At the same time, more than half of UCC congregations throughout the United States have less than 200 members and are led by part-time pastors. Since most churches fewer than 200 members cannot afford to hire pastors with college and seminary debt, a leadership challenge lies before us ... There is a need for multiple paths to form well-trained leaders, both lay and ordained, for spreading the gospel in church and society.

... These programs will not become substitutes for traditional Master of Divinity programs but will become complementary means of equipping leaders for the future. Clearly, the church of the future will be led by both lay and ordained individuals, not all of whom will participate in the traditional model of preparation that includes four years of college and three years of seminary ...

Clark went on to say that one TAP graduate was pursuing traditional seminary study and that a new revised curriculum would be forthcoming, "focusing not on what needs to be *taught*, but on what needs to be *learned* in order to form more effective leaders for the church."

In February and March, representatives of the UCC, the Alliance of Baptists, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) met nationally in Washington, D.C. and statewide for Alabama in Birmingham to work out ecumenical relations in matters such as camping programs and continuing education for clergy (*a la* TAP).

This year, youth from the Conference would be treated to a very different experience from the past. Titled "Practicing in the Garden," young people would spend a week living on an organic farm north of Chattanooga, Tennessee and taking trips to sites that were endangered by pollution, between June 18 and 27.

Said Betsy Flory in a reflection in the May 2004 newsletter that defined her pedagogy in that youth gathering:

My own theology has strong roots in the creation stories of Genesis and in my understanding that we humans are, individually and collectively, a reflection of the image of God. The first few chapters of Genesis introduce us to this God and allow us to know

God as one who loves to create and call forth, who loved collaboration (God asks the land and sea to bring forth their inhabitants), who delights in difference, who grounds being in intricate, intimate relationship and above all as one who brings life into the world. These ideas I have from scripture have been reinforced by my observations and experiences of the natural world around me. I understand from this confluence of experience and story that I, with all my human companions, am to reflect these characteristics of God in the manners in which God created each of us to do it. Further, I understand that because my creation has at its roots both the breath of God and the dust of the earth, I am inextricably entwined with both. I cannot be the human God created me to be without also understanding that I reside deep within this matrix made of God's intention for life and the incredible variety of that intention's physical manifestation. Nor can I live within this matrix without seeing that the ways I choose to live affect its health and vitality. My--our--ways of being in this world either cooperate with or interfere with God's intention for life.

The several hurricanes that struck the Southeastern U.S. during 2004 were met by the Disaster Assistance Relief Team with emergency kits prepared by the new United Church of Cookeville, Tennessee and toys by First United Church (E&R) of Nashville, which were used by residents of Port Charlotte, Florida after Ivan hit.

In preparations for the 25th General Synod, the SEC began recruiting volunteers in January and February for hospitality and logistical functions. Also, a "pre-Synod event" (fundraising function) took place on April 1 and 2 at Victory For The World Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia. This featured speakers such as Jeremiah Wright of Trinity UCC in Chicago and Renita Weems of Vanderbilt Divinity School.

At the March Board of Directors meeting, a \$36,000 deficit faced members, who resolved to increase income; a new Korean-American church start, Salim UCC, meeting on the premises of Church of the Savior in Roswell, Georgia, was authorized; an enrollment of eight cohorts and 60 participants was the current state of the TAP program; and instead of a typical annual business meeting due to the massive amount of time and resources that would taken up by the 25th General Synod, elections would be conducted by paper ballot and no in-person meeting would take place as usual.

From July 1 to 5, the 25th General Synod took place in Atlanta at the Georgia World Congress Center. Bennie Liggins and Desiree Pedescleaux-Andrews were co-chairs of the Local Arrangements Committee.

There were many highlights of this occasion, which marked in the minds of many the high-water point of the Conference's 50 years. The more important were these:

Peg Muenstermann, of Community Church in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, and Bette Graves Thomas, of First Congregational Church in Atlanta, were the two honored laywomen from the Conference for this Synod.

Some features included an orientation to the UCC for new church starts, as well as consultations with staff and the Rev. Angie Wright of Birmingham's Beloved Community Church. A TAP convocation was held for similar purposes, as well as to discuss the Ministry Issues Proposal that would be decided at this Synod. People were invited to sing in a "Massed Choir" at the closing worship service.

Vitally important for the SEC was the celebration of the publication of *On the Heels of Freedom: The American Missionary Association's Bold Campaign to Educate Minds, Open Hearts, and Heal the Soul of a Divided Nation*, the end result of Joyce Hollyday's six years of work with the Rekindle the Gift program. On Sunday, July 3, there was a special worship service that commemorated the book, program, and the AMA itself, with Milton Hurst as special guest speaker. Hurst's profound wisdom and musical talents were on full display in that assembly.

Two special honorees were Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann and Civil Rights leader and former Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young. Both were clergymen holding standing in the Georgia-South Carolina Association.

Following Synod, a golf fundraiser was held at a country club in Woodstock, Georgia.

Remarked Tim Downs in the October-November 2005 newsletter:

The words that I have heard most often to describe General Synod are: *grace-filled, dynamic, inspiring, awesome, courageous, joyful, challenging, and powerfully faithful*. The newspaper headlines caught the more sensational moments, but they could not capture the spirit. The exhibit area was a marketplace of communities coming together with an effervescence of color and conversation. The worship experiences took us with rare eloquence and soaring inspiration to places of both challenge and comfort. The committee meetings were marked by open dialogue and careful listening. As I said in our Conference's welcoming comments to the General Synod, 'It will either be a good time or a good story!' Who would have guessed it would be both? I have no doubt that the honor of hosting General Synod will leave an enduring mark on the life and character of the Southeast Conference for years to come.

Associate Conference Minister Joyce Hollyday:

We decorated, transported, greeted, planned worship, provided childcare, sold souvenirs, acted as youth stewards, preached, sang, prayed, danced, cooked barbecue,

gave directions, and answered endless questions. Whatever need or crisis arose--from a delegate who lost her luggage, to a participant who needed an emergency root canal, to a child who felt lonely away from home on her birthday--volunteers stepped in to provide clothes, a dentist, a party.

From the opening procession around the stunning baptismal font to the final anointing with oil, the diverse and wonderful gifts of the Conference were on display. Sunday morning brought a poignant celebration of the oral history project that led to the publication of *On the Heels of Freedom*, with Milton Hurst, Susan Mitchell and Joyce Hollyday preaching and several honored members of our American Missionary Association churches in attendance. That evening Kenneth Samuel preached with passion, aided by the exquisite dancing of Susan Mitchell and the energetic Victory For The Church dance troupe and choir. Monday evening brought a different mood, with the quiet jazz of Dwight Andrews and his talented quintet--a soothing balm after an emotional day in which the UCC passed a historic resolution on marriage equality. That day, July 4, ended with many of us watching fireworks from our hotel windows across from Centennial Olympic Park.

A cadre of youth stewards added their own unique energy to the gathering, and young people were an integral part of the worship. Lena Alston offered an eloquent reading, her brother Kemet filled roles as candle bearer and anointer, and a lively group of young volunteers danced for the opening service.

... The overwhelming response from the attendees was gratitude. One woman came by our sales table, handed over fifty dollars, and said, 'I don't want to buy anything; I just want to thank you.' When the staff and Local Arrangements Committee were summoned to the stage at the end of Synod on Tuesday afternoon--serenaded on the way by Ray Charles' 'Georgia on My Mind'--the standing ovation from the crowd was exuberant and sustained.

Associate Conference Minister Kathy Clark described the Ministry Issues Pronouncement in this way:

In part, the Pronouncement calls upon Associations and Conferences 'to make available paths of preparation for ordained ministry which are appropriate to the needs and possibilities of the church and community, including seminary education, regional theological formation programs, and mentoring.' As has always been the case, it is the responsibility of the Associations' Church and Ministry Committees, in covenant with local churches and students-in-care, to engage in a discernment process regarding the fitness of any particular candidate for authorized ministry and the appropriate path of preparation for that candidate ...

Concretely, the first step in implementing this Pronouncement will be the development of training materials and appropriate guidelines for Church and Ministry Committees. Toward that end, Parish Life and Leadership, in partnership with Conference and

Association staffs, seminaries, the Council on Racial and Ethnic Minorities, representatives of lay theological training programs, and others, will develop and deliver training to assist those upon whose shoulders these responsibilities fall. A Committee on the Ministry 'Tool Kit' will be completed by late this fall and will include resources for organizing the work of the committees, assessing ministerial readiness, and practicing discernment, among others. The *Manual on Ministry* will be reviewed, revised, and reprinted by 2007, and constitution and bylaws changes will be ready in time for General Synod XXVI. In addition, a national network of directors of licensed/lay ministry training programs, including TAP, is being formed. One of the first tasks of the network will be the development of minimum standards for such programs so that they can be mutually recognized from Conference to Conference.

But, of course, the big news emanating from Synod was its decision to affirm the rights of same-sex couples to marry. Two diametrically opposing views were carried in the October-November 2005 SEC newsletter:

From Karen Mann of Central Congregational UCC in Atlanta:

... I did not expect the vote to go any other way. I am new to the United Church of Christ ... The UCC I know is the church that voted overwhelmingly in support of equal rights. The UCC I know could not have voted any other way. The UCC I know is the church of the 'extravagant welcome.' The UCC I know has always welcomed me.

She went on to compare the July 4 vote's triumph with the heartbreak of a similar measure being voted down in her former denomination, the United Methodist Church.

But on the other end, symbolizing the cost that would have to be paid, was the Rev. Roy Bain, pastor of the Congregational Christian UCC of Lanett, Alabama, in the heart of the conservative portion of the Conference that became ever-increasingly uncomfortable with national priorities and some of its more outspoken liberal neighbors. He said:

The Marriage Equality resolution has had devastating effects on the East Alabama-West Georgia Association. Some of our churches have cut off OCWM contributions, while others have withdrawn or are considering withdrawing from the United Church of Christ (his congregation included). There seems to be no middle ground for either side on this issue ... In the past, there was some type of middle ground where we could 'agree to disagree,' so to speak. Not this time ... While these churches hear that they are guilty of breaking covenant, they are convinced that General Synod broke covenant by passing a resolution that would cause 'division and pain.'

Bain's point was proven by statistics. Seven of the Association's 11 congregations withdrew within months if not weeks. Several others elsewhere would eventually leave



the UCC within the next five years. But the effect was nowhere as devastating as it was in more solidly conservative parts of the denomination, in states like Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Ohio, and Indiana. Because the traditionalist voice in the SEC had become so muted, several other churches simply stopped giving to OCWM and attending meetings, and to this date, about seven of the Conference's 50-plus churches remain only nominal members of the UCC, unlikely to return to full involvement in the life of the larger church. On the other side, though, more than a few struggling congregations got a real boost in the arm from GLBT individuals and their straight allies visiting them for the first time, and in many cases, joining and rejuvenating local church life. UCC church experts openly stated that the Open and Affirming designation was a boon to evangelism, and it proved true in a number of churches. That in itself told much of the story of the remainder of the tenure of Tim Downs.

## **6. IN THE AFTERGLOW OF SYNOD, 2005-13**

In mid-2005, two predominantly GLBT churches, one the Metropolitan Community Church of Columbia, South Carolina, and the other the independent Holy Trinity Community Church of Nashville (meeting at Brookmeade Congregational there), began talks that eventually led to their affiliation with the UCC. Tim Downs reported intense interest in affiliation from churches and ministers throughout the region, thanks to Synod and the "Still Speaking," branding initiative, in joining the UCC somehow and announced the beginnings of a "Southern Strategy" to handle the requests. But it would take time:

At this time, we do not have the staffing and support in place to do new church development at the level of activity to match the interest around us. We need training for new church pastors and support for pastors who are already doing new church development. In light of this, our staff, in collaboration with the Board of Directors of the Conference, is beginning to put into place a five-year plan. We are preparing to make a major commitment of funding, to seek a matching gift from the national UCC, and to embark on an effort to seek grant support for this undertaking. We will also be engaging in conversations with seminaries to explore ways in which we can collaborate in training both lay and ordained leadership.

Also in summer, Betsy Taylor Flory took a group of young people to South Korea to visit the congregation pastored by former Open Community Church minister Kwan-Hae Chi.

On August 7, the Conference mourned the loss of Milton Hurst, who just one month earlier gave a stirring speech and sang an even more stirring solo of traditional hymns during the July 3 tribute to the AMA and dedication of Joyce Hollyday's book at General Synod. Hurst died from a fall in his Birmingham home, and was also a student-in-care seeking ordination for his position as pastor of First Congregational Church in Talladega, Alabama.

In late August, the massive devastation and dislocation caused by the strike of Hurricane Katrina upon the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi created another opportunity for mission by churches and the Conference. This meant the mobilization of DART and countless money and items donated by people throughout the territory to help refugees fleeing the destruction, some of whom permanently settled in the territory and a few of whom became members of SEC churches.

The Conference headquarters relocated several blocks to the north along West Peachtree Street in early 2006, into the building whose main tenant was the national

headquarters of the Arthritis Foundation. This brought expanded space, with several offices and a small conference area for meetings.

As 2006 progressed, the Conference continued to seek to harness the energy generated by the 25th General Synod to its advantage. In part, the SEC was trying to respond to massive interest by searchers on the UCC website for a congregation in the Southeast, reputedly more often than all other conferences combined, according to the national administrators of the database. This put a premium on the Conference's ability and determination to plant new churches in areas where the UCC had never been before. With close cooperation between the SEC and Local Church Ministries, Tim Downs, Bennie Liggins, and a recent arrival on the Conference staff, Cameron Trimble, devised the "Nehemiah Initiative," named after the Old Testament figure who presided over the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Hebrews' Exile. Its preliminary mission statement declared that it would "Continue our successful efforts at cultivating congregations that wish to affiliate with the United Church of Christ ... Sustain our focus around congregational vitality in established churches. We will continue to engage churches that seek congregational renewal, providing them with support and resources from the Conference's Covenant for Renewal program and the Still Speaking, campaign."

Trimble was ordained on June 4 as the Minister of Evangelism and New Church Development, the position funded in part by LCM. She was from a United Methodist background.

Ginny Nixon of Community Church in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, chairwoman of the constitution and bylaws revision committee, announced that the new document would involve significant realignments on the Board of Directors, namely eliminating the old "senatorial" system of two association representatives that had governed the Conference since its inception as the Southeast Congregational Christian Convention in 1949. Instead, each of the representatives from the SEC to the boards of the UCC's covenanted ministries would sit on the Board, along with a "team partner" to work alongside the representative and several at-large members. The Annual Meeting approved the document to be used for a probationary period of one year before full implementation in 2007.

After the Alabama-Tennessee Association granted its approval, the 250-member Holy Trinity Community Church in Nashville, Tennessee, pastored by Cynthia Andrews-Looper, was received into the UCC on June 25.

On July 7, the Conference received word of a three-year, \$200,000 grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, an organization known for its support of LGBT- and progressive-oriented religious bodies, for the TAP program. This would allow partnerships with theological seminaries to take shape, as well as potential study-abroad programs.

Also, a series of weekend "leadership workshops" were offered from August to November in the Conference office in Atlanta on the following topics: "Vision Development," "Marks of a Hospitable Church," "i-Tools for Today's Leaders," "Basic Church Administration," "Self-Care: Finding a Balance for Healthy Ministry."

The Nehemiah Initiative announced goals in the August-September newsletter of starting four new churches by 2008. A full program of implementation and self-evaluation would accompany the efforts, with the aim of "experimenting with new ministry models, training new church start pastors and networking with other conferences throughout the UCC to build a strong coaching and mentoring network."

In September, members of the three active associations' Church and Ministry committees met in Atlanta to discuss and plan for procedures needed in "fitness reviews," or disciplinary actions, for misbehaving clergy. "Working with case studies, we talked about what constitutes misconduct in sometimes ambiguous circumstances, how issues of power and authority are central to clergy relationships, and more. We also spent considerable time discussing how to handle the pastoral considerations for everyone involved in a fitness review, from the pastor being reviewed to the ones bringing the complaint to their families, to the church(es) involved to the review committee itself," said the December 2006-January 2007 SEC newsletter.

The Conference, in conjunction with the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta of the Presbyterian Church (USA), held a two-day seminar on October 9 and 10 featuring Dr. Mark Tamthai, the director of the Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture at Payap University in Chang Mai, Thailand. His specialty was the interaction of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity in Southeast Asia.

Cameron Trimble and the Nehemiah Initiative announced a new program that would perhaps "seed" the UCC in places where it might not otherwise be viable. Called "Comma Connections" after the use of the linguistic tool in the "Still Speaking," campaign, these would be small groups, at least 12 people in each one, that would be "guided by progressive theology committed to the UCC ideals of radical hospitality and welcome of all people ... The structure is intentionally flexible allowing for creativity to meet the needs of the participants." The first groups would be started in

metropolitan Atlanta, said Trimble, with a group affiliated with Emory University and led by the Rev. Linda Smith paving the way. While the program was not ultimately successful, it did provide opportunities for learning about which methods worked and those that did not.

Continuing the streak of good news in the new church start front in 2007, the Conference received a \$50,000 grant by the Carpenter Foundation (see above) to begin a series of annual Leadership Institutes for new church pastors, a part of the Nehemiah Initiative.

The April 2007 meeting of the Board of Directors reported that the sale of the building of the defunct First Congregational Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee (an AMA congregation) brought 40 percent of the proceeds to the SEC, with the remainder going to the original designee, Fisk University. The geographical boundaries of the Conference were clarified through an agreement with the adjoining conferences, especially Florida and South Central in regards to the northwestern part of Florida and the Gulf Coast region of Mississippi. One new church in the Kirkwood neighborhood of eastern Atlanta (DeKalb County) was under development, with its pastor, Susannah Davis, having undergone requisite training by the Nehemiah Initiative. It began meeting in a coffee house Davis owned, and became almost instantaneously vigorous in mission and social justice work.

The Annual Meeting of 2007, held at Central Congregational Church in Atlanta, witnessed the full implementation of a constitution and bylaws that had been in preparation for about four years. Delegates also passed a resolution calling on the State of Georgia to end the death penalty, which was submitted by the host church.

Early 2008 saw a delegation of TAP graduates take a trip to the nation where Tim Downs grew up, Thailand, for a "global immersion" visit to study "Inter/Intra-Religious Dialogue, Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding" under the aegis of the Institute of Religion, Culture, and Peace of Payap University in Chang Mai, the institute with which Dr. Mark Tamthai, who visited the Conference in 2006, was affiliated. The Carpenter Foundation grant financed this visit, in which 16 people were involved.

At the Board of Directors meeting on April 18, Cameron Trimble reported that 16 churches had been either successfully launched or acquired from other traditions in the past decade. She also said, "there are three congregations in the Conference considering the possibility of birthing new churches. We have a fully developed a new church development starter kit, and an excellent process of congregational affiliation. If

the Conference continues to pursue an aggressive growth strategy over the next 10 years, we may have up to 220 congregations, up from 53 today.”

In more mundane actions, the Board laid the beginnings of what would eventually become a Conference-wide Church and Ministry Commission, with initial duties of granting theological scholarships, supervising pastoral counselors, and working to implement the mandates of the UCC’s Ministry Issues Pronouncement.

In an action that would presage the spinoff of the Nehemiah Initiative, the Local Church Ministries division of the UCC offered to provide half of Trimble’s salary in order for her to consult on new church starts elsewhere in the UCC.

In late summer, this update on the emerging capital funds campaign appeared in the August-September 2008 newsletter:

The first phase of the needs assessment process has been completed. A Statement of Needs was developed in over fifteen meetings with committees and leaders of the Southeast Conference and its associations. Subsequent to the Board’s approval of the Statement in June, a series of meetings was held to make final revisions. At this time, Steve Havey, who was retained to conduct the Campaign, is interviewing fifty-five of the leaders of the Conference to test the Statement of Needs and solicit feedback.

At that point, the three main targets of the campaign were to help finance improved communications, the TAP program, youth programming, and the founding of churches and revitalization of other ones. In early 2009, a series of meetings took place at various places around the territory to inform and answer questions congregations would have about the campaign.

At the January 24, 2009 Board of Directors meeting, a preliminary budget with an \$80,000 deficit was approved, the decision was made to discontinue the print version of the newsletter in conjunction with the national UCC decision to halt *United Church News* (the SEC publication was a “wraparound”), and opportunities for individual contributions (not from churches) to OCWM were introduced.

In March, Tim Downs attended a meeting where representatives of the conferences encompassing the Southern U.S. discussed protocols for collaboration in ministries such as new church starts and youth and women’s work. The hope was for “future collaborations around leadership development, congregational vitality, and technologies.” And, in April, the Conference held a convocation of new churches from not only the UCC, but also those of ecumenically-related denominations such as the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, all three of

which were partners in a "Formula of Agreement" whereby each communion recognizes the validity of each other's ecclesiastical standing and ministry, making cooperation considerably easier than in the past.

At the 2009 Annual Meeting, final approval was given by the delegates to inaugurate the long-planned capital funds campaign, titled "Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives." The minimum goal was \$1.4 million, with a challenge amount of \$3.8 million. Ambassador Andrew Young served as honorary chairman of the campaign, with the working chairpeople being Susan Mitchell of Rush Memorial Congregational Church in Atlanta and Bob Watson of Central Congregational Church, also of Atlanta. Churches, and possibly the Conference itself, would be awarded grants based on programs that fit one of three criteria: "Building Covenant and Connection," "Building Leaders," and "Building Congregations."

The 2009 New Church Leadership Institute, conducted between August 3 and 7, had 150 people enrolled, some of whom were from SEC congregations. Workshops about various aspects of new (or renewing) church life were held.

Since the departure of Betsy Flory as Conference youth advisor in order to take a parish position, the Conference had little recourse but to join in the programming of its neighbor Southern Conference and its annual Winter Retreat for young people at Blowing Rock Conference Center in the mountains of North Carolina. The 2009 meeting featured the topic of violence and poverty and how communities of faith could help. The 2010 meeting dealt with consumption habits and the environment. It has since become an annual tradition held each January.

New church starts at the turn of the decade included Peace Congregational Church in Clemson, South Carolina; Open Table: A Community of Faith in Mobile, Alabama; Kirkwood UCC in Atlanta; and a youth-oriented/emergent start by the name of Praxis UCC, also in Atlanta.

One significant development, though, was occurring as the Nehemiah Initiative began transitioning into a separate, non-profit entity called "The Center for Progressive Renewal," a full-time enterprise of consultation, coaching, and resource distribution in regard to planting or renewing churches throughout the entire UCC, not just the Southeast. Cameron Trimble would become executive director, and, initially, CPR opened its offices inside the SEC's headquarters. Fundamentally, this was a venture between the Conference and LCM, but other partners, notably Lancaster Theological Seminary and the Hope for Peace and Justice organization, were involved also. According to the January-February 2010 update on the Conference website, the

success of the 2009 New Church Leadership Institute was the impetus for “spinning-off” church planting work into a new organization. One philosophical starting point for CPR as contrasted with other church start programs was its emphasis on church planting and renewal as a primary pastoral skill, rather than something “anyone can do if he/she puts his/her mind to it,” and the belief that existing congregations should do the main work of “birthing” new congregations rather than the middle judicatory, in the hopes of eliminating much of the problem of bureaucratic misunderstandings, confusion, and insufficient accountability that bedeviled much mainline Protestant work in this area in the late 20th century, after the “religious boom” of the 1945-65 period. Another executive director of CPR was the former pastor of the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas (the world’s largest predominantly gay and lesbian congregation), the Georgia-born Michael Piazza. Piazza and Trimble would also become co-pastors of Virginia-Highland Church in Atlanta and lead that parish through a thoroughgoing revitalization.

At the same time, in early 2010 Kathy Clark assumed the position of “Associate Conference Minister for Ministry Formation and Leadership Development,” meaning that she not only directed the TAP program, but was now in charge of all activity relating to ministerial preparation throughout the Southeast Conference, although the association Church and Ministry committees still had the final say as to a candidate’s fitness to serve in an ordained or licensed capacity. In a few years, though, thanks to the need to regularize procedures, that last fact would change, finally impacting the one bastion of mid-level UCC life that had been least responsive to change—the associations.

An increasing reliance on technology to bridge the spatial gaps between many of the Conference’s far-flung churches was evident in early 2010 when, for the first time, the UCC History and Polity course, taught by Kathy Clark, was placed online for students at the various seminaries in the region and in the TAP program to easily participate in. By the mid-2010s, technology had developed to the point that previously expensive and difficult things like teleconferencing would become easy and cost-effective.

The international dimension of TAP got another financial boost when a \$350,000 grant to the program and Lancaster Theological Seminary was given by the Henry Luce Foundation to bolster the Global Theological Education’s “inter- and intra-faith conversations, as well as conflict transformation and peace building” at the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace of Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Visits to Thailand would take place in 2011 and 2012, and opportunities for PU students to visit America were part of the package also.



One deployment of the Disaster Assistance Relief Team had to take place in the Conference's own backyard, as flooding struck the Nashville area in the first week of May. Led by Holy Trinity Community Church there, churches and individuals sought to provide necessities for hundreds of displaced persons whose homes and/or businesses were damaged by rising water. About two dozen church members attended a DART training session just some weeks before, a providential coincidence.

At the Board of Directors meeting before the annual meeting of 2010, held at Church of the Savior in Knoxville, Tennessee, it was announced that three possible new churches, one a start and two existing congregations, were in negotiations for recognition. The Jubilee Circle of Columbia, South Carolina was a theologically free-form spin-off of Garden of Grace Church there (it later chose independence over UCC affiliation); another was a predominantly GLBT congregation in Jackson, Mississippi, Safe Harbor Family Church; and Covenant Community Church in Birmingham, Alabama was the former Metropolitan Community Church of that city. The latter two would eventually join the Conference's roster, Safe Harbor Church later that year and Covenant Church in 2013. Later in 2010, Christ Covenant Church in Decatur, Georgia, another former MCC congregation, began steps toward UCC affiliation also.

Debbie Spearman, a member of Central Congregational Church in Atlanta who was a retired executive with the Kroger supermarket company, was hired as the "follow-up director" for the Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives Campaign. She would be responsible for supervising the churches' remittances of their pledges. She now bears the title of "Generosity Coordinator."

The New Church Leadership Institute's theme for 2010 was "The Seven Secrets of New and Renewing Congregations," which included "knowing why you are in ministry, where you are going, communicating effectively, managing carefully, being engaged in mission outward, creating transformational community and worship." Some 30 people attended the event, now conducted by the new Center for Progressive Renewal.

Another group from the TAP program took another immersion experience in October, this one much closer to home, and not just in the literal sense of the term. In the words of the Rev. Thomas Warren, pastor of Community Church in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee:

Gathering outside the Pentagon, searching for the 'free speech' zone for which we didn't know we needed a permit, brought our week-long engagement with empire to an interesting close. We had spent the previous four days learning about and witnessing before the 'powers and principalities' which impact our world so greatly. On our fifth day we came to the Pentagon, the great global symbol of American power, and couldn't find a place to speak freely. All week long, as part of our TAP program called 'Powers,

Principalities, and the Book of Revelation,' we had been speaking very freely. Beginning with immigration and labor policy, moving to the economic policies of the World Bank/IMF, peering into the black operations of the CIA, and grappling with the death-dealing business of defense contracting, we had come face-to-face with the 'beast' of Revelation 13. This 'beast,' representing in Revelation the Roman Empire, takes shape today through the institutions of the most powerful nation on earth—the United States. It was to these institutions that we spoke. Our goal for the week was deeper understanding. We came to learn about the economic and military institutions which shape our lives and take the lives of so many others around the world. We did so through personal study, group dialogue, guest lecturers, and deep engagement with the Book of Revelation. We grounded ourselves in the Word, worship, and strength of our community. We were awed by the impact of these institutions, and given hope through prophetic ministries which we visited while in (Washington) D.C.

The trip was followed up the next summer at a pre-General Synod event in Tampa, Florida.

TAP's success was leading Tim Downs, Kathy Clark and others to consider reformulating it to fulfill the UCC's new requirements for ordination and licensing. The January 2011 update of the website announced that the new program, titled "PATHWAYS," would "provide two year training for lay leaders, three years for licensed ministers and four years for candidates on the path to ordination." This would eventually, it was hoped, be adopted by conferences other than the Southeast. At home, there would be a phase-out of TAP and a corollary phase-in of PATHWAYS. Funding would be sought through grants and arrangements would be made for institutional support by Lancaster Seminary and CPR. CPR, in the meantime, was offering online classes such as "Dynamic Leadership in the Smaller Membership Church" and "Using Appreciative Inquiry Tools to Lead Change."

At the February Board of Directors meeting, members voted to increase national OCWM by 15 percent and reduce expenses to \$521,000, leaving an \$8,000 deficit. About half of the Conference's congregations were expected to give to the Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives campaign. Also, a change was made regarding the Annual Meeting in that the 2011 edition would be for one day only, with "business ... kept to a minimum, worship ... shortened, and opportunities for interaction and fellowship ... developed." The night before, a special dinner would be held for ministers as "a first step in getting to know one another better and creating a stronger network of support for clergy in our conference."

Meanwhile, for the TAP participants who went on the Global Immersion trip to Thailand, things were different from the previous excursion in 2008. According to Sarah Kim, the initiative's director:

This time we had seven seminary students and a faculty member of Lancaster Theological Seminary along with our own seven participants from the Southeast Conference. The two groups merged beautifully, in light of their conscious efforts to collaborate, adapt, and to exercise love and patience. Second, the Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace's (IRCP) program had changed—the length was three weeks long with the inclusion of a special trip to Mae Sot, a small city in the northwestern border of Thailand that holds large-size Burmese refugee camps." At a post-visit gathering, "The predominant sentiment among the participants was a sense of gratitude in being able to participate in such a special learning opportunity. The group candidly discussed the challenges of being exposed to a part of the world where issues of displaced Burmese refugees, HIV/AIDS, regional violence, and religious diversity pose societal problems that engender division, injustice, and suffering.

Once again, the territory of the Conference was shaken badly by destructive weather as tornadoes inflicted damage in Alabama (most heavily in the Tuscaloosa area), Georgia, and Mississippi in the last week of April. The DART team was, of course, called into service to help repair shattered structures and lives, and churches showed deep generosity toward the victims.

Successful grant writing netted the TAP and PATHWAYS programs a grant from the UCC's Richard and Helen Brown Foundation and Fund for Essential Conference Ministries. This money would help fund continuing education meetings for clergy. Summer CPR classes included "Church Renewal 101," "Leadership in a New Church World," and "Developing a Stewardship Plan for Your Church."

The main item of note at the 2011 Annual Meeting was the Conference's adoption of the "Global Missions Conference" designation from the Global Ministries division of the UCC and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Kathy Clark and Marcia Bentley, of First Congregational Christian Church in Birmingham, and board member of the Wider Church Ministries division, prepared the enabling resolution, which meant that the SEC "commits to an action plan where it prays regularly for partners, missionaries, and the world; educates its members about global issues from preschool age to adult; seeks justice for the 'least of these' in the international community; receives the gifts of the global church; gives to the work of global mission; sends its members into the world to share the Good News of Jesus; grows in sharing the story of God's mission with others; and implements this resolution ..."

And in keeping with this commitment, one group traveled to the Democratic Republic of the Congo under the auspices of the Fuller Center for Housing (founded by Millard Fuller after he left Habitat for Humanity) to do construction work on residences and a sawmill.

By November, some 21 congregations had pledged to the Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives campaign for a total of \$508,000.

In preparation for a second visit to Thailand by the TAP Global Immersion initiative, Tim Downs remarked in the January 2012 website update:

When we speak of globalization in the context of the church, we are speaking of a different way of doing mission. Ours is not the mission of the 19th century, to promote a culturally bound Gospel to redeem the 'heathen,' often while functioning in cooperation with colonialists or western economic interests. It is instead a mission that is engaged in partnership with churches that we have been in ministry for up to centuries. When we go to other countries, we go at the invitation of our local partners. What ministry we bring, we bring in collaboration with them. Whether in refugee or disaster relief, or building churches, hospitals or schools, our efforts are led by local leadership. In a world where the most rapidly growing churches are in the Southern Hemisphere, we are beginning to recognize that those who were once taught by our forebears now have much to teach us.

On May 30, an interesting panel discussion was held featuring UCC-related writers who were associated with the "Still Speaking," initiative. Participants included Quinn G. Caldwell, Martin B. Copenhaver, Donna Schaper, Anthony B. Robinson, William C. Green, Lillian Daniel, Ron Buford, and the host pastor of the event, Kenneth L. Samuel of Victory For The World Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

"Cultivating a Culture of Call" was the theme of the 2012 Annual Meeting, held at First Congregational Christian Church in Birmingham. Expanding upon that, the general thrust of panel discussion and workshop themes was "identifying, cultivating and equipping leadership for the emerging United Church of Christ." This was work that Kathy Clark excelled in, and it became a quite bittersweet meeting as, upon its conclusion, she was offered a job in the Ministry Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) team of LCM as Minister for Members in Discernment, the new term for "students-in-care" seeking ordination. With this transition, Sarah Kim became the new director of the TAP and PATHWAYS programs. At the meeting also, after years of planning and development, a new Conference-wide Committee on Ministry was impaneled. Its first members were Lawrence Clark (chairman), Henrietta Andrews, Dorinda Broadnax, Yelanda Collins, Doug Farmer, Marvin Morgan, Carrole Moss, Kimberly Peeler-Ringer, John Stewart, and Wayde Washburn. Prior to this action, all three active associations voted in their annual meetings to cede Church and Ministry matters to the SEC, giving up their most significant power in the UCC system. This

would have a profound impact upon those separate but covenanting bodies in the coming years.

To give Sarah Kim assistance in operating the PATHWAYS program, the services of Laura Arnold, a recent graduate of Atlanta's Candler School of Theology, were retained on a part-time basis. Arnold took a pastorate in Iowa and made that state her home base of operations, enabled by technology such as email and teleconferencing.

But that was not the greatest transition of 2012 by any means. Tim Downs himself, having clocked in 16 years of service to the SEC by then, announced his retirement, effective June 30, 2013. Work began, of course, in selecting both an interim to immediately follow him and a permanent successor.

After some years of deliberation that was delayed by a relocation to a suburban area, the Covenant Community Church in Birmingham (now Center Point, Alabama) voted overwhelmingly in October to affiliate with the UCC; its pastor was the Rev. J. R. Finney. Also, despite another UCC congregation in the area affiliated with the Florida Conference, the SEC authorized the December beginning of the UCC of Pensacola, led by the Rev. Patrick Rogers.

On October 27, a gathering of "members in discernment" and others took place in Decatur, Georgia, "to provide guidance through a process that was begun this year that represents a dramatic shift in the process of preparation for ministry in the United Church of Christ." In particular, participants were guided in the preparation of ministerial portfolios that would be used to help them find positions in the parish or chaplaincies. Such packages of information would include familiarity with the UCC's "Marks of Faithful and Effective Ministry" as well as academic and spiritual attainments.

As the clock wound down on the Downs administration of the Conference, one new staff member was brought on board: Chris Lyman Waldron, co-pastor of the Praxis UCC new start in Atlanta, became the communications director of the SEC, responsible for website maintenance and other publicity coming from the headquarters.

On April 20, for the first time, the Conference itself, rather than the associations, acted to receive new churches into the UCC. One was the new start in Mobile, Alabama, Open Table: A Community of Faith. Another was a church that had been considering UCC affiliation for several years, Covenant Community Church in Center Point, Alabama, outside Birmingham. Two others were predominantly GLBT: Restoration Inclusive Ministries (now Real Inspiration Ministry) in Decatur, Georgia, was allied with the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, serving a mainly African-American clientele; and

Phoenix Christian Church in the western Tennessee community of Wildersville, between Jackson and Nashville, representing the UCC's first-ever venture into that part of the state, at least ever since the Memphis-area congregations moved membership to the Missouri Conference in the 1950s and 1960s. Another new church start was commissioned, Praxis UCC in Americus, Georgia, led by a then-worker for the Fuller Center for Housing, Kirk Lyman-Barner, seeking "welcoming and integrated Christianity" in that racially-divided area.

With the passage of a "unified governance" measure in the national UCC, the previously separately governed covenant ministries (themselves successors to the old pre-UCC boards) would now be controlled by only one centralized body, eliminating several delegates from the Conference Board of Directors in its 2007 configuration. During the Annual Meeting, the SEC constitution and bylaws were revised to reflect this new reality. The TAP program was also closed out after 14 years with a final banquet and commencement for graduates. The capital campaign now had \$646,700 in pledges.

But the big story of the 2013 Annual Meeting was the end of the road for retiring Conference Minister Tim Downs. Concluding a bountifully successful 17-year tenure, he received tributes from over 200 guests and delegates. On the Saturday of the meeting, the Georgia-South Carolina Association, having no real functions after ceding its Church and Ministry powers to the Conference, voted to dissolve, meaning the congregations now directly related to the SEC as its primary body of affiliation. It was one of those occasions that clearly delineated one epoch from another in Conference life, as its people prepared for transitions not only in personnel and programming, but basic expectations of judicatory service to congregations.

## **7. BE YE TRANSFORMED, 2013-15**

Randall Hyvonen, recently retired from the position of conference minister in the Montana-Northern Wyoming Conference, came as the interim in August. Hyvonen, a native of Montana, had been in the South before as a seminarian, attending Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville. He also served a congregation in Cleveland, Ohio later pastored by former SEC conference minister Roger Knight, among other coincidences. He said in his first press release, "I hope that my experience of diverse ministries over large geographies will be beneficial for you as we 'bridge the gap' together."

As for the permanent position, the Conference used the search as an opportunity to strategize its future by deciding upon a limited term for Tim Downs' successor. The July website update explained:

During the next few years, the Southeast Conference along with other conferences in the Region will explore transforming the way the tasks now delegated to the Conferences are structured & staffed, with the ultimate goal of sustaining thriving local and regional ministries. At the end of the term, the position of Conference Minister for the Southeast Conference may no longer exist or may be radically changed. The Conference Minister we call for the next three years (with a possible extension to 5 years) will need to be open to a future that is uncharted.

Once again, the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation gave a grant, this time around of \$40,000, to help support the PATHWAYS program. In ministerial preparation news, on July 20, the Commission on Ministry held an ecclesiastical council for members-in-discernment in the territory of the now-defunct Georgia-South Carolina Association. Commented chairman Lawrence Clark, "the current way of doing the Ecclesiastical Council is a stop-gap method until we have an opportunity to address the issue of how to handle the Ecclesiastical Councils in the future." To this point, though, the Commission on Ministry has served in the role once played by annual or semi-annual Association meetings, and, as of now, there appear to be no alternatives in the offing.

In September, it was expected that the Alabama-Tennessee Association would follow the lead of Georgia-South Carolina Association and cease operations. But the delegates, many of whom were not aware of the circumstances that led to the historic action by their geographical neighbors two months earlier, refused to allow an outright dissolution. Instead, they impaneled a "re-imagining" *ad hoc* committee to convert it into a fellowship organization, a process that is still underway as of this writing.

On October 13, several Atlanta-area congregations, mostly those with the Open and Affirming designation, sent members to march in the annual GLBT Atlanta Pride Parade.

During the fall, Randy Hyvonen embarked on an extensive tour of the Conference's territory to get to know the churches well and listen to their joys and needs, an unusual and quite gratuitous step for an interim conference minister who did not expect to stay a long time in his position.

The hard work of the Search Committee paid off, as, just before Christmas, the members located a candidate for the permanent position. June Evlen Boutwell was a second-career minister who was born and reared in Wyoming. Originally an accountant, she started her ministry in Oregon before joining the LCM staff as coordinator of Youth, Young Adult, and Outdoor Ministries. While in the national setting, she worked extensively not only with younger Christians, but also with General Synod preparations, the Pacific Islander and Asian-American constituencies, and the denomination's ecumenical interests. From there, she went to the Maine Conference to an interim associate conference minister position, handling various judicatory responsibilities. Then, after three years, she moved to the Southern California Nevada Conference in the same capacity before becoming the director of that conference's camping program. Her call immediately before coming to the Southeast was to an interim pastorate at a Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregation in southern California. Boutwell was especially attuned to racial justice issues because of her background as the daughter of an American father and a Japanese mother. Another thing she had an affinity for was traveling, a necessity for the Southeast position.

For only the second time in the history of the Conference, a special called meeting of the Conference was conducted on February 1, 2014, just several days after the Atlanta area was paralyzed by a winter storm, to elect her to the position of the fifth person to hold the title of Conference Minister. This was done without a single dissenting vote. Boutwell fielded questions from delegates beforehand, with this summation: "... Throughout (the) answers, Rev. June stressed that her style of entering a new ministry is to begin with deep listening and then to begin building bridges between people, rather than starting with her own agenda ... Taking call and vocation seriously, Rev. June proclaimed that we all have a call from God, as well as a vocation—meaningful work that we want to be engaged in."

In the March website update, Boutwell laid out her approach to the job ahead: "... During this time we ask that you lead us in a process of visioning, planning, and



preparing a road map for our future ... We have much work to do together with great perception, deep compassion, abundant love, and unceasing prayer.”

Later that month, the PATHWAYS program began its third level, meaning that it now had an ordination-seeking component, unlike previously. Five students, three from Iowa (the only other conference honoring the program at that point) and two from the Southeast, were enrolled in Level 3, taking a practicum course taught by the Rev. Dr. Louis Kavar.

In April, the General Synod of the UCC sued the State of North Carolina, seeking to overturn a law denying permission for clergy to perform same-sex marriage ceremonies or weddings of any kind other than one based on a license within the same county. Immediately, June Boutwell sounded the clarion call to churches in the Southeast, situated in states where attitudes were even more hostile toward homosexuality than North Carolina.

She said:

I believe this is a very important step for the UCC to take in defense of the freedoms we hold dear. As far as we know, this is the first time a religious entity has sued on the grounds that these laws violate First Amendment rights, so we are breaking new ground. But it is ground that you and I need to have broken or our pastoral ministries right here in Southeast Conference ... could suffer the same infringement at some future time.

As things turned out, the Supreme Court of the U.S. would invalidate all state laws prohibiting same-sex marriage in 2015, and some SEC congregations were in the forefront of marrying interested couples in places where few other ministers or magistrates would.

By the spring, the number of ONA churches in the Conference had grown to 19, in addition to two new church starts, by the addition of three Alabama congregations within a two-month span. All states in the territory now had at least one ONA congregation, as well. Tennessee had the most, with six, and all three of South Carolina's congregations held the designation as well.

Later in the spring, the Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives campaign had \$658,700 in pledges, well below what was first hoped for but nonetheless pleasing to the staff. A review committee was impaneled to approve or reject congregational (or the Conference's) application for monies therefrom, with a maximum grant of \$5,000 to any one project. This would take place over the span of several years, with two cycles per year, something continuing as of this writing.

In August, the Global Theological Education component of PATHWAYS visited the Blackfeet Native American reservation in Montana, seeking a “Native American context and (framing) the theological question around the notions of deep symbols and eco-spirituality.” Said PATHWAYS director Sarah Kim, “we found ourselves challenged to stretch our comfort zone and expand our theological imagination in this beautiful, rugged, other-worldly territory.”

Toward the end of the year, another new fellowship emerged in Greenville, South Carolina, by the name of Emmanuel UCC. Led by an Alliance of Baptists-affiliated pastor, the new congregation worshiped in a Lutheran building and marked the fourth congregation in a state where, only a decade earlier, the UCC had only two.

Moving on to the final year of the SEC’s first half-century, in February Kirkwood UCC in Atlanta hosted a national Justice and Witness Ministries program called “LED Training,” an acronym for “Leaders Engaging and Developing.” The object was “to train members of churches to support local church members—laity and clergy—who wish to infuse more faith-based justice conversation, education, skills and opportunities into their ministries and communities.” Newer churches like Kirkwood were leading the way, it seemed, in enthusiasm for the denomination’s work and witness, examples for established congregations to emulate rather than the other way around, however paradoxical it might seem to outside observers.

During the 2015 Annual Meeting, held at Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia, a special ceremony was held to present Lonnie C. King, Jr., a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organization that sought civil rights in metropolitan Atlanta from a home base at Rush Memorial Congregational Church, an honorary doctorate by Piedmont. More recently, King was a founder of an Atlanta charter school.

Unfortunately, though, the years 2014 and 2015 were horrible ones from the perspective of the ongoing struggle to secure the civil rights of African-Americans and non-Caucasians in general. Just one week after the Conference Annual Meeting, a white youth opened fire on a Wednesday night prayer meeting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina and killed nine people, including the pastor, who happened to be a state legislator. The pastor of Circular Congregational Church there, Jeremy Rutledge, was a leader in the community’s efforts to heal and recover from that savage act. The event forced a drastic re-examination of attitudes on the part of South Carolina state leaders, to the point of making the decision to remove the Confederate

Flag from the state capitol grounds in Columbia, something that the SEC and other organizations had sought for many years to happen.

In early December, due to the sale of the building in which the SEC's headquarters were located, the Conference was forced to relocate, this time to the premises of First Congregational Church in Atlanta. In one sense, the Conference had come full circle, returning to its rooting in the local church by taking up residence in one, the first time it had done so after renting secular facilities for nearly a quarter century.

And to top off the culmination of 50 years work and witness was yet another new fellowship emerging to take its place in the Atlanta religious pantheon. Rehoboth Fellowship, an African-American start aimed at those excluded from more traditional settings, was pastored by Troy Sanders, a minister of the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. Rehoboth, which means "now the Lord has given us room" in Hebrew, took the place of Praxis UCC of Atlanta on the NCS roster due to Praxis merging with Decatur UCC.

On December 31, 2015, except for perennial financial problems, it could be plausibly argued that the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ was in better shape than it had been before. High loyalty, manageable finances, vigorous work for evangelism and justice all marked the life the 55 or so churches and the approximately 11,000 souls encompassed by the SEC shared. The often torturous path to this point can only elicit a sense of gratitude to God for the grace shown in every new church, every mission opportunity, every time justice prevailed over wrong, and more important, each relationship forged in love and friendship across class, racial, and lifestyle barriers.

# **A Year of Historical Vignettes**

The following articles were published monthly  
during 2015 and 2016 in the  
Southeast Conference newsletter  
"Conference Connections"

## **1. One Spring Saturday**

At a stately but aging Greek Revival building on the busy corner of Ponce de Leon and Piedmont avenues in midtown Atlanta on the warm spring Saturday of April 24, 1965, a revolution of sorts happened. A small body of white, largely Southern-accented Christians acted to voluntarily, without coercion from above, take into its bounds churches from a segregated body within the same denomination. On that day, the Southeast Convention (SECNV) of the Congregational Christian Churches, in its annual meeting held at Central Congregational Church, took in four former congregations of the Evangelical and Reformed Church in Alabama and Tennessee and also some 23 predominantly black churches of the Convention of the South (CS) residing within the six-state territory, to form the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ. In so doing, the UCC finally became rid of the color line at the conference level, bringing the denomination one major step closer to its goal of full inclusion of all people.

Ever since the 1963 UCC General Synod called for the denomination's home mission board to terminate financial support of churches and entities that continued to practice racial segregation, some of the SECNV's leaders and churches felt threatened by the UCC's commitment to equal rights. Even as the theme developed especially from abolitionist days, work in developing white Southern churches had been rather studiously oblivious to parallel Congregationalist educational and evangelistic work among the "freed people."

With a few exceptions mainly in cities, the SECNV's churches typically had worship less than frequently than weekly. Some of their ministers had never had the opportunity to get a formal high school education, let alone a collegiate or theological one. More important than anything was "saving souls," and most saw no need to change doctrine or attitudes to reflect industrialization-induced prosperity, since most everybody had come from a agricultural background and their attitudes had been shaped by the hard times of the Depression.

By sharp contrast, the African-American congregations, all but a few founded by the American Missionary Association, were mostly located in proximity to the academies and universities planted by brave Northern missionaries. For generations, the CS churches had been mainly composed of a professional African-American clientele, usually physicians, attorneys, businesspeople, and—especially—educators. So a truly oil-and-water blending was about to take shape with the merger, with race not by any means the sole barrier to harmony. Class and educational differences and attitudes toward modernity and received traditions also played their hand in this move.

Under the leadership of one W. C. Carpenter, Sr., a staunch segregationist and flamboyant preacher, one faction of the SECNV did what it could to forestall the merger on the first attempt at the 1964 Annual Meeting, and succeeded by 86 to 75 votes, a large number from churches who seldom if ever came to the Annual Meeting and came for the specific purpose of stopping the union. But a measure was approved afterward to revisit the matter the next year. During that interval, Southeast Convention superintendent James Lightbourne, Millard Fuller (before his fame as the founder of Habitat for Humanity), and UCC field representative Edward Brown worked assiduously to change the outcome next time around.

So, when the time came in April 1965, the stage was set for highly tense debate and confrontation, amplified by the presence of UCC President Ben Herbstler and fraternal delegates from both the E&R and CS churches. Opponents of the measure managed to get a roll call vote, but this time, the pro-merger side won, 116 to 99, with two abstentions. Both the presence of progressively-minded churches from Tennessee and Kentucky and the relative absence of rural conservative churches from Alabama and Georgia contributed to the reversed outcome. With a number of churches refusing to buy into integration, though, the UCC Statement of Faith's proclamation of Jesus extending His offer to accept the cost of discipleship would ring very true. But so would the joy, and both would be in evidence over the next 50 years.

## **2. Reconciling Racial Differences**

*NOTE: The Rev. Edward "Ed" Brown was a pivotal figure in arranging the union of bodies that became the Southeast Conference in 1966. He was a representative of the national Board for Homeland Ministries who was assigned to the Southeastern region to help reconcile racial differences between the Southeast Convention (white) and the Convention of the South (black) of the Congregational Christian Churches and, later, the UCC. The following is an excerpt from an interview Mike Stroud, director of the Project 66-16 history initiative, conducted with the Rev. Mr. Brown on June 16, 2009. Brown died on May 23, 2012.*

... I was asked by Galen Weaver of the national office (of the) United Church of Christ if I would accept a job of being located in the Southeast Conference and help the Southeast Conference work out the problem they had with churches who were not ready to be interracial, or inclusive, as we preferred to call it. And I traveled around for 10 years, visiting churches who had leadership problems or conflicts between members or the community in which they were located. and I did conflict resolution and different ways of trying to help them work through their problems. And I lived in Atlanta with my family, and I was assigned to be a cooperative member to some other conference, and I was on loan to the Southeast Conference, and worked with conference minister James Lightbourne, whom I learned to respect and appreciate, and it was mutual.

And I remember in the early days when we would go to meetings together, that one of them that stands out in my mind was when the first sit-in occurred in North Carolina, we happened to have been in the car together when they announced it on the radio.

As part of my job within the Southeast Conference, or Convention, at that time it was called, I would go to every association meeting and, then, I would be on call from ministers or Superintendent Lightbourne, as we called him. When churches were interested in having me be a casual visitor at their annual meeting or their association, or especially, if they were having a problem-solving meeting, that's where I was expected to be kind of a friendly, pew-sitting resource, if they felt like asking me anything, and if they didn't feel like asking me, I would know how to use in-between times to ask indirect questions to help out what I sensed was the decision-making process. So I was (a) very active participant in the structured life of the associations as well as the Convention, and especially the annual meetings.

And in Tennessee and Kentucky—we had only one or two small churches in Kentucky; it was basically Tennessee—the Tennessee churches of our denomination were much further along, and I happened to know Reverend Clyde Flannery quite well, and he was

the pastor in Nashville (at Brookmeade Congregational Church), and we worked together for quite some time—I guess it was a year or two—and eventually, we—I mean by “we,” Clyde Flannery and myself—taking the organizational initiative, we could help that association vote to become inclusive.

And that’s when I had a strong difference of tactics with the conference minister, Mr. Lightbourne, because he wanted to be in charge of the time when the whole conference voted to become inclusive and not to have it done an association at a time. And he actually used the phrase, “If you persist in doing this, I can have your job.” And I don’t take to threats, anyway, but I know how to bide my time and be patient when it’s for a good cause. So, we let up on our determination to be the first association in the Southeast Convention to vote to be inclusive, and I considered it a defeat in one sense, organizationally, but a victory in terms of where the people and the membership were.

Now, in Alabama, it was more difficult, and I think (of) Ray Berry, who organized, and I was part of the first few meetings of, that church group in the farmhouse on the edge of Huntsville (now known as United Church) before they eventually built their church. And I was a great admirer of Ray Berry’s, and his wife, and their adopting children from different countries to show what they were made of. And to me, Huntsville remains a source of both pride and humility, as I think about the work that I was able to take part in. I didn’t do the main work; Ray Berry did it. Ray and I arranged to have Andy (Young) come up and speak to the association meeting, and Andy Young was the first black Christian that they had met on equal terms. And I know that it influenced them in that situation. But it wasn’t an easy victory.

I worked a lot with the black churches in Birmingham, and I had a very close personal friend, a minister who had gone to Yale Divinity School, as I did, but he was in a class later than mine. But he was a very close friend of Andy Young’s, and when I’d go to Birmingham, I would stay at his home and, in those days, segregation was in order as a law, and we just deliberately neglected it and were ready to take consequences, but we didn’t have any because the neighborhood he lived in was primarily for black residents. But there was a minister who was a member of First Congregational Church, the black church in Birmingham, Harold Long, and I was able to introduce him to the white minister. I helped orient, at the conference minister’s request, the white minister who had been a Baptist like I, and, later on, I tried to help the First Congregational Church and the Pilgrim Church (of Birmingham) have joint meetings.

And it was interesting that, I think out of the years that I was around, there were three or four efforts to have the congregation vote to have a joint meeting on Race Relations Sunday or some similar event. And the congregation voted it down, all except for the



last time, but I was impressed that they were very near to accepting First Church as equals, and there were already some existing friendships between certain members, but the totality of it was governed more by fear of people's reactions in the neighborhood, and so it failed, if we can consider that failure. I think it was really an effort to be Christian, and it didn't work out at that time.

There were other churches in Montgomery, and I related actively to them, and the black church was very influential legislatively, and I know that they liked to have me come meet and preach and be with them. The Alabama situation, I think, was kind of difficult to assess. I think about that time, my job was changed, nationally. I had been attached to the Department of Evangelism and Church Extension, which was run at the national level by Dr. Purd Deitz, who was a famous minister known throughout the nation, and he had been part of the Evangelical and Reformed side of our church, and I was on the staff with several well-known national leaders, and I was the least known among them, but I think I was as well-prepared for race relations as any on their staff. And I think that's why I was part of it.

And when they changed chairmen, and (Deitz) had decided I had done my part in helping bring the Conference to a positive vote, they assigned me to work with one of the men, Dr. Shirley Greene. Shirley Greene and I had the responsibility of trying to influence political structures in Alabama, and Mr. Greene asked me to arrange for an interview between him and Governor Wallace, and I did it with some reservations, because I didn't have too much respect for Wallace, and I wondered about his religious conviction. But when we went to his office, we were sitting in the office and it turned out to be the Governor of Alabama wanting to have a conversation with some prominent leader, and it was a new experience to sit there and realize that, here was a Christian minister of our denomination talking to George Wallace, and Wallace was talking to his own bishop on the telephone. And I've wondered how many times I would have wanted to know what they were talking about, but, on second thought, I didn't think it would have made any difference. And that was my attitude at the time about relating to George Wallace. But, politically, I had good relationships with representatives and senators (and) did send them materials that the denomination was using to promote integration and inclusive religion.

### 3. Puritan Days

To take a strictly chronological account of how far back the roots of the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ actually go, one has to go all the way to the late 17th century. It was in the swampy, flat, black-soiled “Low Country” of the colonies that became South Carolina and Georgia where Puritans fleeing the brutal winters and overpopulation of Massachusetts and its contiguous neighbors brought Congregational churches to a hot climate. For some 200 years, parsons and high-minded laity carried on a style of life at first identical to that in the frigid northeastern quadrant of America. These followers of the doctrines of John Calvin and radical British Reformers were staunchly industrious, they believed education was a moral duty for the masses rather than a luxury for the privileged few, and they demonstrated deep concern for the impact of religion upon the civic health of a community. Erskine Clarke of Columbia Theological Seminary remarks in his *Our Southern Zion* that both church and society shaped each other in complex ways:

... On the one hand, the ‘Scholastic’ tendency of the Reformed (or Calvinist) community—with its fear of chaos, its hierarchical assumptions, and its quest for order, harmony, and balance—would provide powerful ideological support to that side of low country society that ... sought the integration and preservation of the community through time by justifying the present system of authority. On the other hand, what has been broadly identified as ‘the humanist impulse’ within the Reformed tradition—with its fear of enclosing boundaries—would resonate with the region’s restlessness and its steady move toward the modern world. [1]

And in worship, iconoclasm and a literalistic fear of violating of the Second Commandment (Philonic division) as enunciated in Exodus 20:4-6 drove the Puritans toward austerity, augmented no doubt by the circumstances of limited material development during settlement days. But it suited the Calvinist aversion to idolatry perfectly, as Clarke elaborates:

... The eye looks out to its object, but hearing receives into the human heart God’s word. Hearing, not seeing, was consequently the foundation of Reformed spirituality—for God speaks, and faith, it was said, consists of listening to the word of God ... there was a conviction that when God is presented in an identifiable form, an image, the purpose is to control God, to domesticate and reduce God to the tool of those in power. Fixed religious images lead to consolidations of power and to social docility ... [2]

There was also, joyfully to the hearts of those in the present-day UCC, an ecumenical sensibility to the Puritan churches in the Low Country. According to Richard Taylor in his pioneering book on the subject of Congregationalism in the South, *Southern Congregational Churches*, the Charleston church, which we today know as Circular

Congregational, had in its membership not only Yankee Puritans, but also other Calvinist groups such as French Huguenots, the Reformed of Germany and Switzerland, and the beginnings of Scots Presbyterianism in South Carolina. [3] Eventually those groups would leave to form separate churches, but it gave the Charleston church the reputation as an incubator for Christian diversity, something it is still known for in its fourth century of existence. [4] It was a voice for free expression in the midst of an Anglican establishment that had an unsavory association with royalist suppression of liberty.

The two other Low Country Congregational churches that had the greatest cultural impact were Dorchester in South Carolina and Midway in Georgia. [5] The latter was in fact a child of the former, and claimed to have nurtured early leaders of Georgia and other states and other political figures, as well as early military, medical, legal, and clerical leaders of the South. Whatever one makes of those assertions today as to the intellectual and moral caliber of the membership of the Midway Church, its survival up the eve of the Civil War put it in far better stead than its numerous plantation-based sister churches. For, as it turned out, most of those were absorbed by aggressive Presbyterian proselytizing due in part to the increasing population advantage it had from Scots—Highland, English-border, or Ulster (erroneously, but popularly, termed “Scotch-Irish”)—immigration into the Carolina and Georgia upcountry. The other side of things, of course, was the increasing identification of Congregationalism in the public mind with opposition to slavery, especially from the 1830s onward. To be known as an “abolitionist” in most of the South in the years running up to the Civil War was the equivalent of high treason. Thus, Southerners developed poisoned attitudes toward a “meddling, Yankee” faith that they came to blame for inspiring slave revolts and attacks upon the planter economy of cotton, rice, indigo, tobacco, and other crops.

Also, Taylor points out the plain, hard facts of geography in determining the character of future settlements:

... Most population movement inland from the coast tended to be due west. When one realizes that New England is east of New York (and not north of it), one realizes that New Englanders had a lot farther to go before they reached the center of the continent. When Yankee settlement was filling in central and western New York, southern coastal settlers were more than half the way to the Mississippi River.

The few Congregationalists that did arrive continued, for the most part, the cooperation with the Presbyterians already begun ... [6]

Furthermore, there was significant theological interpenetration between the two bodies on matters relating to historic Reformed, or Calvinist, teaching on human salvation, the public duties of Christians, and abstinence from vices such as alcohol and amusements. This tended to diminish significantly any differences between the two communions. As Presbyterians possessed decided organizational advantages over Congregationalists in the field of evangelism and church planting in frontier communities, most people of Reformed sympathy, usually better-educated (and better-off) settlers, instinctively lent their efforts toward founding Presbyterian congregations, due to their more sturdy ecclesiastical infrastructure, as one might describe it these days. Pastors could more easily maintain contact with their colleagues in presbyteries and synods rather than distant correspondence with the still-fragile Congregational associations in New England. In other words, it was not as if Presbyterians were “stealing” Congregational “sheep” on purpose, despite the grumblings of later generations when polity and theology had become more sharply defined between the two groups. In any case, both became handicapped in the days of the Second Great Awakening by an obstinate insistence on a trained, educated clergy, something that the two eventually dominant Christian groups in the South, Methodists and Baptists, mostly did away with for reasons having to do with their focus upon the “common person” and their belief that elaborate doctrine sullied simple Christian teaching, where the emotional experience of salvation was the overriding concern. (But in a great irony, two different schismatic groups among Methodists would join with Congregationalists decades later.)

With cultural secession having preceded political secession by some years, the death knell of the original Southern Congregationalism was really a foregone conclusion, even before April 1861 when the new Army of the Confederacy seized control of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, a short distance from Independent Church. The Midway whites and whites in the other mixed-polity congregations fled almost entirely to pure Presbyterian ones, where reactionary interpretations of Scottish Calvinist theology were gaining favor against the supposed compromises of modernity represented by Northern “heretics” educated at the likes of Andover and Yale. To be sure, the more sanguine views of God’s benevolence advocated by figures like Nathaniel William Taylor and Charles Grandison Finney were, in retrospect, probably out of place in a time of belligerence where Protestant Christians were fighting yet other Protestant Christians. But the coming of the Civil War and its aftermath would *of its own accord* harden prejudices against ideas and people believed to be culturally subversive, traits that are still discernible today in much of the present territory of the Southeast Conference. As raw, anger-saturated emotion supplanted calm, rational discourse, a sane, humane, sober theology suffered perhaps the greatest loss of any American cultural institution by the War.

## NOTES

[1] Erskine Clarke, *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 37.

[2] *Ibid.*, 66.

[3] Richard H. Taylor, *Southern Congregational Churches* (Benton Harbor, MI: self-published, 1994), 12.

[4] For more detailed histories of Circular Church, see these works: Joanne Calhoun, *The Circular Church: Three Centuries of Charleston History* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2008); George N. Edwards, *A History of the Independent or Congregational Church of Charleston South Carolina, Commonly Known as Circular Church* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1947); David Ramsay, *The History of the Independent or Congregational Church in Charleston, South Carolina, From Its Origin Till the Year 1814; With An Appendix Containing the Speech of the Rev. William Tennent, A. M. in the Commons House of Assembly, Charleston, S.C. January 11, 1777, on the Petition of the Dissenters From the Church Then Established in That State; Praying for a Constitutional Recognition of the Equal Rights of All Religious Denominations* (Philadelphia: J. Maxwell, 1815).

[5] For a more detailed history of Midway Church, see James Stacy, *History and Published Records of the Midway Congregational Church, Liberty County, Georgia* (1903: repr. Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1979).

[6] Taylor, 22.

#### **4. *The American Missionary Association***

Of all the 15 traditions discernibly distinct to be found in the Southeast Conference of the UCC, none may be beloved more by its adherents than the African-American Congregational churches founded by, or else related to, the American Missionary Association. The story of the Conference would be grossly incomplete without reference to their witness in word and deed to their communities, a witness that entails salvation and uplift alike.

The AMA was a descendant of several abolitionist societies and assumed the task of educating those freed by the victory of Union forces over the Confederacy, whose entire existence was predicated upon the maintenance of the so-called “peculiar institution” of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the surrender of the Confederacy at Appomattox Court House in Virginia in April 1865 opened the door for the long-prepared, long-awaited influx of missionaries under the AMA’s aegis to move southward for the purpose of establishing academies, some of which eventually became colleges.

What truly made the AMA’s approach distinct from more secular initiatives such as the Freedmen’s Bureau and the (much later) Rosenwald Schools on the one hand, and competing religious groups such as Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian mission work on the other was the almost-total symbiotic fusion between the intellectual and the spiritual in that very few churches did not have a very close relationship between an adjoining academy, and vice versa.

Development in subsequent decades produced a distinct hybrid of sorts between the serenity and mission-oriented piety typical of Northern Protestantism and the vibrancy and stirring preaching and music in worship typified by the African-American church at large. Both elements were modified, and modified each other, to produce, in varying degrees, the life and witness of the 14 congregations of this tradition still affiliated with the UCC as of the mid-2010s.

Much like the beginnings of Christianity among others of African descent in the South, blacks first encountered Congregationalism on the plantation churches such as Midway in Georgia. The chronicler of Midway Church, James Stacy, posits a freed slave conducting worship in a brush arbor on Sundays between the two regular worship services beginning sometime in the late 1780s. [1] It would take twenty years or so, though, before the small group of slaves would receive a building of its own from the largesse of Midway’s members, with Congregationalists and Methodists supervising the

preaching. [2] By 1811, several of the more prosperous members offered their premises for worship and teaching, with a full-fledged superintendency to supervise them. [3]

This continued until the high-minded Charles Colcock Jones (1804-1863) came to the Midway pastorate around 1831, whereupon he embarked on a more aggressive program to educate and supervise the religious activities of the slaves. Of course, Jones encountered resistance from certain of the white members, fearing that slaves might interpret Bible stories such as the Exodus and the Gospels as encouraging (in their minds) undue notions of self-worth, which might potentially inspire revolts and runaways. [4] But Jones spent the rest of the decade formalizing the catechismal sessions, hampered mainly by Georgia laws forbidding teaching reading to slaves [5]. In 1835, the elaborate scheme, with several layers of accountability, boasted some 450 pupils. [6] That number increased eventually to around 650 or so by the end of Jones' pastorate in 1848. [7]

To a large degree, Midway's concern for the African-American was fairly uncommon, paternalistic though it would be to modern eyes. The Presbyterian/Congregational Puritanism of that congregation practically demanded education as a divine obligation, a conviction that was lacking in other communions driven by the revivalism of the Great Awakenings, where otherworldliness was the dominant tone espoused by white ministers. Picking up on the spiritual comforts of evangelical Protestantism, with reassurances of a Godly judgment that would one day reverse their degraded, painful condition if they remained faithful to the leading and saving redemption of Christ but without the emphasis whites placed on passages like Romans 13 and others stressing subordination to authority, slaves fashioned a more emotionalized, fervent version of the faith amongst themselves. Scholars of recent times have generally attributed it to the need for identity formation, to keep themselves together under the brutal conditions in which they lived. Whatever the motivation, Midway's pastors and elites sought to channel and sublimate that energy, only partly to deflect the risks of revolt. The other motivation was undoubtedly a guilty conscience, felt below the level of consciousness, since it was only with the greatest effort that Midway's members, certainly versed in the Bible and the "liberal arts" (humanities), could square their regard for human worth with the economic necessity of unpaid labor that the cash-crop system entailed.

As the legal vice upon slaves by Southern state governments grew tighter and tighter with many whites abandoning even token concern like that found at Midway for those in bondage, sentiments north of the Mason-Dixon line favoring abolition grew more and more inflamed, with the AMA taking a then-drastic stand against churches soft on slavery, defining it as a sin no less ruinous to a Christian people than liquor, tobacco,

gambling, and illicit sex. Generous donors supplied the money to get the schools off on a good foot when conditions became ripe for their founding.

Justice was deeply embedded in the DNA of the AMA, but so was piety. Two generations of ministers who had profound connections to the tradition, Joseph Taylor Stanley (1898-1983) and Alfred Knighton “Tony” Stanley (1937-2013), wrote successive books in 1978 and 1979, both of which are indispensable as introductions to the heritage and work of the AMA among Southern blacks. Father Taylor and son Tony were educated in Congregational-related institutions, and deeply imbibed the curriculum of self-discipline, vigorous intellectualism, and moral and social uplift found in those institutions. One could not truly improve upon Tony Stanley’s description of the AMA found in his *The Children is Crying: Congregationalism Among Black People*.

At its inception, the American Missionary Association was not primarily an educational society. It was an agency for missionary endeavor and was organized primarily to extend the gospel ...

Since the propagation of the gospel was (the) “philosophical base” upon which the American Missionary Association was founded, the AMA schools were a means to that end. These schools became an expression of the mission of the association, but they were never regarded as ends in themselves ...

The association and the denomination felt, therefore, that their goal could be attained only through an extensive program of education, which would prepare Freedmen [sic]—who were of a peculiar religion, culture, and past—for responsible membership in Congregational churches and for free citizenship in a theocratic society. Hence, the schools preceded the church and were to function as auxiliaries of the church. Not only was the slogan “Equal brotherhood [sic] in the family of Christ” a democratic ideal that could be achieved by secular education for citizenship in a democratic society, but it was also theocratic, and its ultimate attainment could be reached only when people professed this kinship in the Congregational kind of expression of the church of Christ.

[8]

Tony Stanley, who was the long-tenured pastor of Peoples Congregational UCC in Washington, D.C., and an early mentor to Civil Rights leader Jesse Jackson, had a thoroughly vested interest in such a conception of society, imbued into him at an early age by his parents, Taylor and Kathryn Turrentine Stanley. The senior Stanleys were the husband and wife who directed Congregational work among Southern blacks from the 1940s until the 1960s. In his 1978 memoir, *A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South*, Taylor corroborated and complemented his son’s rendering of the motivation and result of the AMA educational and religious mission:



For the most part they were true, New England-type Congregational churches, because they were organized initially by New England-type Congregational ministers and missionaries. The first pastors were white; the first Sunday school teachers were missionaries in AMA schools. Many churches were proud to be *the First Congregational Church* in their community or city. Others chose names of northern churches and of famous Congregationalists: Plymouth, Pilgrim, Broadway, Chandler, Beard, Beecher, Gregory, Howard, Hubbard, Woodbury. All started as Congregational churches, indoctrinated with Congregational principles. Their covenants and constitutions (if any) were patterned after northern churches. They adhered to the *Congregational Manual* as to organization, structure, sacraments, and ordinances of the church.

Early Congregational missionaries made every attempt to evangelize; they made no attempt to proselytize. At evangelistic services converts were asked to choose the church they would attend, and many chose Baptist or Methodist churches. Intelligence in worship, in the understanding of the Bible, and in the application of truth in matters of personal conduct and social intercourse was emphasized. These churches became "lighthouses" in their respective communities, and although often accused of being quiet, unemotional, and highbrow, they furnished far more than their share of community leadership in education, in moral uplift, and in economic and social progress, as well as in the ministries of the church. [9]

These reflect an understandably biased view of the AMA experience. In a more detached vein, Florida State University historian Joe M. Richardson rendered the early teachers and ministers as filled with contempt at the supposedly chaotic, unregenerate state of African-American religion as it emerged from the throes of slavery. Richardson said, "Most AMA workers never fathomed the slave's religion, which emphasized joy and collective hope rather than personal guilt and self-denial." [10] Hard work on the part of teacher and pupil and minister and layperson alike would be required to effect the synthesis that would hold together the AMA mission in what Tony Stanley termed "the land of poetry and song" [11] in order for the principle of Congregational order to give its distinctive shape to the primal fervor of black religious expression.

Much like what happened to the American Home Missionary Society among whites, the AMA was originally supported by a variety of Protestant denominations mainly of Anglo-Saxon descent until they pulled out one by one to establish their own denominational programs to minister to Southern blacks. So even with the initial reluctance on the part of some AMA officials, Congregationalism would become the fledgling churches' affiliation by default.

In the present territory of the Southeast Conference, between 1865 and 1931 (the date of the Congregational merger with the Christian Connection), according to Richard Taylor's *Southern Congregational Churches*, some 150 churches were founded for African-Americans. Of those, only 38, or 25 percent, of them survived into the

Congregational Christian period. But a different set of circumstances played into the lack of translation of Black Congregationalism into a mass movement throughout the South. Again, Richardson diagnosed some of the cause in the reluctance surrounding the church extension portion of the mission as the AMA, "hoping to avoid offending black denominations, organized Congregational churches slowly and circumspectly," [12] despite having plenteous funds and perhaps personnel to be more aggressive. Those that were founded were not particularly successful in gaining large numbers of recruits, requiring heavy AMA subsidy for the few that did exist, eventually draining off resources that could have been used for further expansion. [13] Other issues related to the public perception of the movement as cold, aloof, and obsessed with worldly matters. In turn, the AMA missionaries perceived the indigenous emotionalism of the freed people as little short of paganism and that a homegrown ministry was to blame, with no training in the proprieties of Anglo-American Christendom. One key to addressing the problem were the theological departments in the new academies and colleges, such as Fisk in Tennessee, Talladega in Alabama, Atlanta University in Georgia, and Tougaloo in Mississippi, with promising new graduates who might yet carve the niche needed to make Congregationalism a publicly viable option among those aspiring to more formality and a higher social status than was associated with the overwhelming Baptist and Methodist majority. Plain class suspicions drove much of the tensions in the early years, as well as a lingering distaste for white leadership, upon which the early AMA Congregational churches were dependent for at least the first generation. In any case, Richardson remarked bluntly,

... Congregationalism was never a national church. It was not indigenous to the South. Most blacks had never heard of it. Even though they quickly separated from southern [sic] whites, blacks frequently remained in the same denominations. The Presbyterians who did much less educational and church work than the A.M.A. gained more members because they were better known ... [14]

But none of those handicaps deterred the founders of the numerous congregations from attempting to construct this fairly unique intellectual-religious synthesis, one whose defining characteristics are often more intuited than defined with any precision. When one visits most of the AMA-heritage churches in the Conference today, one is struck by the similarity in worship structure to the "mainline" Anglo-Saxon tradition (e.g., Methodist, Presbyterian, other UCC) and the relatively staid singing. But the preaching and the sentiment among the people is anything but cold or reserved, and the welcome extended to visitors is quite hearty. This conveys the character of the churches possessing a Puritan/Congregational base with modifications reflecting the mainstream of American black religion, usually with regional customs embedded within.

## NOTES

[1] James Stacy, *History and Published Records of the Midway Congregational Church, Liberty County, Georgia* (1903: repr. Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Company, 1979), 164-165.

[2] *Ibid.*, 166.

[3] *Ibid.*, 166-167.

[4] *Ibid.*, 170.

[5] *Ibid.*, 170-171.

[6] *Ibid.*, 172.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] A. Knighton Stanley, *The Children Is Crying: Congregationalism Among Black People* (New York and Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1979), 39-41.

[9] J. Taylor Stanley, *A History of Black Congregational Christian Churches of the South* (New York: United Church Press, 1978), 44-45.

[10] Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (1986: repr. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 143.

[11] A. Knighton Stanley, 48.

[12] Joe M. Richardson, "The Failure of the American Missionary Association to Expand Congregationalism Among Southern Blacks." *Southern Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the South* 18, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 58.

[13] *Ibid.*, 59.

[14] *Ibid.*, 66.

## 5. Congregational Methodism

In 1852, a group of Methodists who complained about the burdens of circuit-riding itineracy and lack of participation in the government of their church met at a residence in Monroe County, Georgia, in the central part of that state, to form the Congregational Methodist Church. As its name implied, it would consist of self-governing churches that called their own pastors, rather than receiving those sent by a bishop or superintendent. The Rev. Simeon C. McDaniel was one of its educated leaders who wrote a book [1] about the movement, with a synopsis printed in *The Home Missionary* magazine:

... I give in their own language (the CMC's) principles:

"1. A Christian church is a society of believers, and is of divine institution.

"2. Christ is the only Head of the Church, and the Word of God is the only rule of faith and practice.

"3. All power necessary in the formation of rules and regulations of government is inherent in the ministers and members of the church.

"4. Every man [sic] has an inalienable right to private judgment in matters of religion, and *all have an equal right* to express their opinions in any way that will not violate the laws of God or the rights of man.

"5. The pastoral or ministerial office and duties are of divine appointment, and regularly ordained ministers in the church are equal.' [2]

Thoroughly in keeping with the republican and populist ethos of Jacksonian era of the "common man," the CMC resulted from an attempt to fit the beloved Wesleyan piety to a polity more akin to the Baptist neighbors of a mostly agricultural population and a practice held to be more in keeping with the Fourth Commandment (Philonic division), in that preaching would occur on Sundays only, and not on weekdays when a circuit rider happened to be in the settlement. The critiques and positive positions the CMC asserted were little different in many respects from that of the "Christian Connection" that merged with the Congregationalists several generations later, under a nearly-identical motivation.

But there were further differences between this nascent movement and its parent church that might be considered somewhat less salutary by modern people. In 1957, Wilton R. Fowler, Jr., a graduate student at a state university in Texas and later an

official in the continuing CMC, laid out more detail about the resistance to weekday preaching on the part of the original faithful.

Attending church on Sunday, they heard the sermons of local preachers, to whom they began to look as their spiritual leaders. Some of the local preachers had formerly been circuit riders who had married. The circuits were often too poor to support a married preacher, and if the circuit rider married, it became necessary for him to stop riding the circuit and settle down on a farm. [3]

It might be just as easily argued, if one did not have the sense of relative poverty of Southern farm life on the one hand and the high-handed tone of Methodist leaders of the time, that such reasoning was a cop-out, excusing poor stewardship. In some respects, it was a rationalization to cover an overriding envy of Baptist freedom. But there were also theological dimensions to the dissatisfaction with the development of Methodism at large that the CMC employed to its advantage, much in line with growing conservative-populist resentment over increasing urbanity and affluence, and perhaps Southern cultural separatism, as Fowler illustrates here:

For a decade before the organization of the Congregational Methodist Church in 1852, the "doctrines of Christian perfection had been largely neglected and had become little more than a creedal matter among the main Methodist bodies." Apparently, however, the doctrine was still loved and advocated in the rural section of Central Georgia by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, because the men who founded the Congregational Methodist Church believed and adhered to "holiness." Yet they had no fault to find with the doctrines of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and even referred to the ministers of that church as "good and holy men."

(Methodism) thrived on the gifts of the humble frontiersmen [sic] and grew with their camp meetings. Few people of great wealth or social position were among its members. However, as the church grew, it prospered ...

It was this rise of wealth in the church ... that caused a "decline of Methodism" beginning in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In the Methodist Episcopal Church (northern) this was expressed by the neglect of the doctrine of Christian perfection, "the toning down of the visible lines between the church and the world," and the failure to emphasize the witness of the Spirit in conversion, thus providing grounds for "uneasy doubt concerning positive conversion" ... There were fewer shouts and hallelujahs ...

The Congregational Methodist Church (in comparison to the MECS) remained small, rural, and insignificant, its growth hampered by its inefficient government. However, this may have been the reason that it held more closely to the doctrines of Wesley, emphasizing regeneration, the witness of the Spirit, and Christian perfection. [4]

And such conceptions of holiness, closely linked to notions that the individual believer is required to demonstrate his or her salvation by testimony of personal experience and by adhering strictly to Old Testament and New Testament Pastoral Epistle passages governing personal behavior, were perhaps of a piece with early Puritan precepts for stringency in morals and conformity to harsh ideas about sin and redemption. But how could such teachings be reconciled with a body that was liberalizing as quickly on many traditional positions as Congregationalism was at the time? Further, after the War Between the States and the resulting animosity of Southerners against their conquerors in almost all parts of life, why would a group of people who almost certainly honored the "Lost Cause" [5] possibly be interested in uniting with a communion that embodied all things Yankee, and thus abhorrent to mainstream Southern sensibilities?

One clue lay in the lack of numerical success of the CMC, as Fowler described it as keyed exclusively to immigration to states west of Georgia, going mainly where its farming constituency could locate new fertile land, abandoning worn-out soil and overpopulation in Georgia and the Carolinas. There was, in other words, unlike its parent body, no systematic program of evangelism in the CMC. [6] Thus, it suffered against more organized and numerous competition, namely from Southern Baptism, a reinvigorated Methodism, and the Campbell-Stone Movement, progenitor of the modern-day Christian Church (Disciples and independents) and Churches of Christ. With a heavy dispersion in several Southern states, fellowship opportunities outside district conference meetings were seldom to be found.

And despite repeated boosterish claims in *The Home Missionary* and other journals that middle-and-upper-class citizens were abundant in those churches, a cursory knowledge of Southern religion and social stratification would suggest otherwise. To be certain, landholding was fairly widespread even in postbellum times and might suggest a level of prosperity that would be lacking in later generations after the collapse in the prices of commodities such as cotton in the early 20th century. Nonetheless, it is a sociological truism, with very little evidence to refute it in this particular case, that the more impoverished a social group is, the more likely its members will turn to more stringent and otherworldly forms of faith in order to stabilize themselves emotionally against a chaotic, insecure life. People needed emotional and spiritual comfort to help them cope when property was threatened regularly by cattle rustlers, bandits, and even bankers; family breakdown was rampant due to large size and a masculine sense of honor that provoked many husbands to abandon wives and children if they could not adequately provide for them; and high mortality rates and relative brevity of life that made people miserable and hopeless at times. Since Fowler indicated that part of the CMC's motivation was deliberately a sectarian protest against "worldliness" on the part of mainstream Methodism, it stands to reason that a goodly part, at least, of its

membership were people who identified closely with this protest against laxity in doctrine and morals induced by affluence and a desire to emulate more cultured forms of Christianity.

A hymn sung by an early leader of the movement, one W. H. Graham, while working on a farm, succinctly expresses the CMC perspective upon faith and life. This was a faith that clearly had no use for grand schemes for social improvement, to say the least.

"How happy is the pilgrim's lot;  
How free from every anxious thought,  
From world hope and fear,  
Confined to neither court nor cell,  
His soul disdains on earth to dwell,  
He only sojourns here.

"No foot of land do I possess,  
No cottage in this wilderness  
A poor wayfaring man,  
I lodge awhile in tents below;  
Or gladly wander to and fro,  
Till I may Canaan gain." [7]

Not only that, but the rudimentary furnishings and circumstances reinforced the general impression of a destitute people, one that might be perhaps more suited for the trans-cultural approach of the AMA (as was the case in Kentucky and Tennessee) than the "red-blooded" Americanism of AHMS. As reported in an 1890 issue of *The Home Missionary* on an AHMS agent's visit to Duncan's Creek Congregational (Methodist) Church in Gwinnett County, Georgia, northeast of Atlanta:

It is two hours and a half from the nearest railway station. It is in a section that was long ago settled, and is now increasing in population and general prosperity, although the people are mostly poor. And I may say the North does not know the first letter of the world poverty. Here it is—the church; an old "church-house" in a neck of woods, the side facing the "big road"; with ample open grounds stretching all around and shaded by the primeval oaks and pines; at the west end the tidily, tenderly kept "church-yard" where they lie who "are fallen asleep"; and no dwelling either way nearer than a good "halloo."

Here is no town, but here are the people. They cannot go to any town for church privileges. Families are large. They believe in family religion as well as in public religion. One can easily see here that the family is the unit of society, if not indeed of the church too ... They come early. They stay late. They bring ample "food for man and beast." Dinner is a picnic, and supper too. The hours of recess are full of the heartiest sociability and uncloyed conviviality. The hours of prayer see the house full: the hours of preaching

see it full to overflowing. The 8 A.M. prayer-meeting brings a houseful, and makes the neck of woods resound with praise ...

... Conversions are expected, prayed for, worked for, generally not in vain. Hereabout, churches, ministers, conference, are all "for the edifying of the body of Christ" and the conversion of men [sic] ...

... when they see, as they now do, that the great heart of the Congregational Church, through its other self, the A. H. M. S., "turns back to Dixie," and when they thank God, as they do, for "the embraces of this great body," and expatiate on Ps. 133:1, and 126: 1-3, it is scarcely possible to escape "embraces" given me as a representative, and I want to shout ... [8]

Very few, if any, of those attributes and situations could be found in the regions where Congregationalism was most successful, such as the Great Lakes and New England.

Richard Taylor notes that the lack of worldly goods predisposed members of the CMC and similar groups such as the Primitive Baptists and the Churches of Christ toward what is loosely called the "anti-mission movement." [9] Another scholar, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, gave it a more precise definition:

... antissionism was one expression of confused internal cleavage between the folkways of the poor and their social betters, a conflict that belies the notion of a monolithic southern cultural unity in opposition to a northern counterpart ...

... Among the opponents of missions were two groups that sometimes reinforced each other but remained distinctive ... The second and larger faction consisted of churchmen [sic] who entertained few, or at least less rigidly asserted, doctrinal objections to evangelistic means, but who criticized particular forms of mission work. They disapproved of the northern agency system of benevolent associations on ecclesiastical, sectional, and social grounds. For the rural Methodists and nonschismatic Baptists who belonged to this category, antissionism was directly related to immediate circumstances, and intensity of feeling regarding it rose and fell according to prevailing conditions. [10]

... (The) Jacksonian movement ... expressed the fears and yearnings of lower-class farmers and workers and of planters and landholders who dreaded and refused to adapt temperamentally to the mercantile world arising about them. Buffeted by rising costs, economic dislocations, and new government-subsidized patterns of transportation and credit; perplexed by the steady arrival of young, alert competitors; bewildered by the walk of reform—antiquor, antigambling, antislavery—these citizens ... jealously held on to familiar ways ... Jacksonianism and hostility to eastern and well-educated missionaries were both part of this same profound cultural resentment ... [11]



More plainly stated, an argument against mission boards and strong denominations would run something like, "What is in it for us? Our money would be going to enrich people up East who think alike, come from the same families as the bankers who oppress us, or else go to far-off places we have never heard of. If God wanted that, it would have been spelled out as such in Holy Scripture." This was particularly salient in the case of Methodism, with its hierarchical government having the potential to enforce acceptance of unwanted trends by isolated rural congregations, who were generally characterized by low levels of literacy and deep cultural hostility to anything foreign or urban. Hence, the CMC came into existence in part as a means toward cultural preservation, to accomplish simultaneously democratization without modernization. A self-righteous posture of moral rectitude and virtuous rhetoric thus became a staple of sermons and addresses in that body, as well as in large number of other Southern churches of the "common folk," regardless of denominational affiliation. Such could not be more different from the leftward movement within Northern Protestantism, with Congregationalism as the representative of mainline liberal religion *par excellence*. Decades of concern for education, experience with communal living in villages, towns, and cities, and having apotheosized Calvinism and, in turn, forsaken it gave an entirely different world view to the Yankee farmer, businessman, or teacher in an entire belt hugging the northern boundaries of the U.S.

At Union Congregational Church in Mountain Creek, Alabama, in the central part of the state, its founding pastor was in fact a Confederate veteran. [12] The County Line Congregational Church near Hampton, Georgia continued the Methodist Protestant tradition (also that of the CMC) of subjecting its pastor to an annual election, an unknown practice in mainstream Northern Congregationalism. [13] Mountain Grove Congregational Church in Cullman County, Alabama, located in the open country of the northern uplands of that state, described its origin in this manner:

The community or settlement was made up of a few German families from Ohio, and Illinois, and several families from Kentucky, but most of the settlers were from Georgia having come here to enter land ...

... The German families had their land dotted with patches of corn, potatoes, and later strawberries and much later cotton ... The bill of fare was corn bread, wild game and fish. Cutting cross ties was about the only way they had to obtain cash for groceries. They received fifty cents for each one ...

... Some of the men got together and built a bush arbor. The arbor was built on the land owned by Mr. Thelbert Bland, about a quarter of a mile from the present site (1990) on the left side of the creek. It was called the Congregational Methodist Church and had as its first pastor, the Rev. William J. Robertson of Chandler's Mountain ... All those

attending the revival that summer drove oxen and wagons. Quilts were thrown in for the children to rest upon. Services were held twice daily, but none at night ...

The church or arbor started off with thirty-three members with fifty or sixty joining by the end of the week. [14]

So, given Congregationalism's reputation in most of the U.S. for refinement, education, and restraint, what exactly was the link between the two very different expressions of Protestant Christianity? Three ingredients appear to stand out: ambition, status anxiety, and salesmanship. The very AHMS agent who wrote the 1890 account above, Sullivan F. Gale, supplied the first and third elements, while S. C. McDaniel himself, previously the staunch historian of the CMC, gave the second.

Sullivan French Gale (1842-1909) was born and raised in Vermont and served in his state militia during the War Between the States. He graduated from Union Theological Seminary in New York and was ordained in Massachusetts to his first pastorate. In 1883 he became pastor of what is today Arlington Congregational Church in Jacksonville, Florida. Florida in the late 19th century was a boom region of citrus groves, cattle ranches, and railroads that attracted a large number of Northerners seeking new opportunities in a warmer climate than many states west of the Mississippi River. Early Congregational churches clustered mainly in the central parts of the peninsula and along the northern half of the Atlantic Coast. With rapidly forming congregations springing up throughout the state in the 1870s and 1880s, the AHMS chose Gale as its superintendent for the Florida work concurrent with his call, and Gale founded the Florida Congregational Conference shortly after arriving in the field.

Like many ministers of the Victorian era, Gale probably believed in something akin to a "manifest destiny" that Congregationalism would supply a growing, bustling nation with its spiritual needs, paying no heed to the past or traditional arrangements that had to be violated in order to meet any supposed demand of the present. A common theme in preaching and rhetoric of the period between circa 1880 and 1920 among Northern ministers was the notion of a "Christian America," essentially a civil-religion fusion of orthodox Christian concepts such as sin and redemption and patriotic-nationalist ones, such as industry and progress. This was probably the baseline from which Gale operated his church extension program in Florida, since boosterism and optimism were practically in the water the settlers drank. A virile but easygoing faith was called for in those climes, neither the dour strictures of older Puritanism nor the apocalyptic fervor of Southern evangelicalism.

As yet, no evidence has surfaced (or likely will surface) about the exact details surrounding the first contact between the Congregational churches in the Atlanta area

and the Congregational Methodists in rural Georgia. But William T. Scott, Sr., quoting *The Southern Congregationalist* periodical, seems to have come the closest to establishing an origin, which started innocuously enough with a CMC minister sitting in a Florida Association (Conference) meeting as a fraternal delegate. Apparently the pastor, although having been imprisoned by Union forces while in the Confederate Army as a young man, was encouraged and excited by what he saw, and approached the Conference about exploring union possibilities. [15] This unnamed minister thus unwittingly became a handmaiden to Gale's megalomania, in truth a natural impulse when presented with an unforeseen opportunity for expansion, by substituting his impressions and feelings for sound cultural knowledge and intuition.

But the die was cast, and Gale and others began the wheels moving toward a union. At this point, though, the story cannot be exactly reconstructed, due to varying accounts. *A Southern Pilgrimage* declares that a delegation led by S. C. McDaniel and other CMC representatives, on their own initiative without any mandate from their side, visited Central Church pastor Zachary Eddy with the idea in mind.

Simeon Clark McDaniel (1837-1901) was from Butts County, Georgia, some 50 miles southeast of Atlanta. Educated as both an attorney and a physician, he went into the ministry of the Congregational Methodist Church in 1857. His main pastorate was at the Fredonia Church in Lamar County near Barnesville, founded several years earlier. Despite McDaniel's ostensible loyalty to the tradition by virtue of his historical knowledge and deep experience, he proved to be a traitor. It would be overly easy to compare him to Judas Iscariot, but he was probably envious more than ambitious, as he saw other denominations prospering and his stagnant. With a background likely to dispose him toward the aforementioned hostility toward anything Northern, it surely took some very strong conviction for him to override such sentiments. The "deal" was cemented in no small part probably by a strong match between Gale's expansionist desires and McDaniel's hopes to become a leader among equals.

The last two words are significant because the most plausible explanation for McDaniel's otherwise inexplicable behavior is status anxiety, a diagnosis he would be given by a modern psychologist. McDaniel's colleagues were, for the most part, undereducated and simple men content with their lot in life—very much unlike him occupationally or culturally. On the other hand, McDaniel's book contains a somewhat defensive tone, indicative of an undercurrent of personal and corporate inferiority. While never covertly expressing it as such, the sensitive reader might grasp his tendency toward overstatement of the denomination's achievements as betraying an insecurity about them, that they should have been stronger than they were. Put another way, a more confident account would not require McDaniel to take an almost

apologetic tone as he does at some points in the book. While this might be unfair to him in that it seems he should be blamed for not assuming the more critical and cynical standards of our day, it does provide a possible clue, albeit admittedly a speculative one, to McDaniel's otherwise puzzling motivations for selling out something he formerly had valued as firmly as life itself.

In any case, McDaniel proceeded on the basis of conversations with Gale and Eddy and Eddy's successors at Central Church to set up a way for CMC churches to depart for Congregationalism. The arena for the action was the Georgia State CMC Conference of 1887, where McDaniel used parliamentary chicanery to get through a resolution that would annex the Georgia churches to the Atlanta Congregational Union in order to form the "United Congregational Conference of Georgia." According to Fowler, McDaniel included several Georgia churches of the doctrinally-identical Free Methodist Protestants in a three-way proposal that would establish a uniting convention, with each church getting one vote in the proceeding. If the vote was affirmative, the measure would go to each concerned church "for ratification or rejection." The final clause of the resolution would encourage other CMC state districts to follow suit with Georgia. [16]

Of course the measure was opposed bitterly, especially by the conference's presiding officer. As a report from the following year's conference put it,

... Said action was uncalled for in that our churches were satisfied as members of and component parts of the Congregational Methodist Church; that we had no formal proposition for union with any other denomination—illegal because it had never been agitated or presented to a large proportion of our church—but the resolutions were drawn and stipulations made calling for a convention a careful canvass made both before and at the session of conference. The pledge and signature of all delegated that could be obtained was procured—the resolutions were withheld, until some of the delegates had left and a motion to adjourn was about to be made when they were offered. When assailed by the majority upon the floor of the conference the previous question was called by the party, moving their adoption.

... Your committee does not believe that any element of a church, no matter how large, has the right to vote other members or any member of a church out of their church—that they have voluntarily joined and into another without their full consent and approval—that all members of those churches who have been so voted out are still legal members of the Congregational Methodist Church. [17]

But the vote passed by a 17-12 margin. Shockingly to modern litigious sensibilities, the continuing CMC made no effort to retake its churches except by deploying a visitation committee to try to forestall districts from withdrawing from the CMC. [18] These days,

McDaniel would have been sued in a civil court for taking action contrary to a non-profit organization's constitution, with malicious intent to destroy it. For, in fact, the CMC sustained nearly fatal wounds, setting off several years of membership hemorrhaging to the Congregationalists, in many cases occurring at the hands of churches not knowing about the circumstances and the illegality of the "merger." Fowler estimated that in Georgia alone, over two-thirds of the pastors and some four-fifths of the membership defected to the new United Congregational Conference of Georgia. [19] Over the next few years, and especially in the 1891-92 period, churches in Alabama and the northwestern panhandle of Florida would join in, in large measure simply by dropping the word "Methodist" from their names. This happened despite having no introduction to Congregationalism, save the impressionistic accounts of Gale, McDaniel, Stephen Bassett, and others in the conspiracy. In those days, of course, no history or polity courses were available for people other than seminarians to take, so the ex-CMC churches might well have received far less information about the denomination than did new churches west of the Mississippi River.

As for the actual uniting convention itself, *The Home Missionary* reported that Central Church hosted the initial gathering in October, where some 50 former CMC congregations, seven from the Free Protestant Methodist denomination, and Central and its three surviving working-class missions came together to devise a constitution and by-laws, basically a carbon copy of that used in Florida, for ratification by the churches. With their approval, the stage was set for the February 29 inaugural meeting of the UCCG. At the meeting, the organization was established, with Redeemer/Central Church pastor George Turk becoming the first president. [20]

Not only was this act against decent relations among Christians, it also offended against Paul's command in 2 Corinthians 4:2 not "to practice cunning or to falsify God's word." (New Revised Standard Version). From the author's standpoint, there is nothing that could justify such trickery except the boosterism of the AHMS and McDaniel's envy of the Congregationalists. Richard Taylor reiterated that the "'merger' was arranged not by either national group, but only by certain congregations in (the) limited area." [21] In reality, it was only in McDaniel's imagination that the overwhelming majority could have possibly wanted to join with a Christian body from the despised North. All the leaders involved could plausibly be said to have suffered delusions of grandeur, and the victims of this grand display of narcissism were the remnant CMC churches, who had to pick up the pieces and re-form themselves. To their credit, they did so and continue to this day as a conservative evangelical denomination headquartered in Florence, Mississippi, near Jackson.

Meanwhile, by the time the UCC came along generations later, this group of churches had been in decline numerically and as a cultural force within the denomination. Like what happened to the majority of the Christian Connection movement, the Congregational Methodist-heritage congregations found it increasingly difficult to relate to an urban-oriented, progressive-minded body that Congregationalism was by the mid-20th century, and many stopped trying. Beginning probably with Beulah Church in Phenix City, Alabama in the 1950s, one by one, the remaining congregations began withdrawing from the denomination to mostly independence, functioning as *de facto* community churches for usually two or three generations after secession. A goodly number, though, no longer exist, having dried up with their respective settlements as farm labor fell to only a fraction of its one-time economic predominance. Many of the faithful who sadly had to close their churches of lifelong membership wound up in Baptist (Southern or independent), Church of Christ, or Holiness and Pentecostal congregations.

## NOTES

[1] S. C. McDaniel, *The Origin and Early History of the Congregational Methodist Church* (Atlanta: James P. Harrison and Company, 1881)

[2] S. C. McDaniel, "Congregational Methodism in Georgia: How Did It Originate?," *The Home Missionary*, May 1890, 14.

[3] Wilton R. Fowler, Jr., "A History of the Congregational Methodist Church" (master's thesis, Stephen F. Austin State College, 1957), 14-15.

[4] *Ibid.*, 47-48, 51-52.

[5] As defined in Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), a pioneering work on Southern mixing of Protestant Christianity and civil religion.

[6] Fowler, 65-66.

[7] *Ibid.*, 18.

[8] "Side-Lights," *The Home Missionary*, June 1890, 56-57.

[9] Richard H. Taylor, *Southern Congregational Churches* (Benton Harbor, MI: self-published, 1994), 37-38.

[10] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture," *Journal of Southern History* 36, no. 4, (November 1970): 503.

[11] *Ibid.*, 511.

[12] *The Heritage of Autauga County, Alabama* (Clanton, AL: Heritage, 2001), 25.

[13] *County Line Congregational Christian Church, 1883-1983, Hampton, Georgia*, n.p., 13.

[14] *Mountain Grove Congregational Christian Church: Celebrating A Century of Service to God and Community, 1890-1990* (Hanceville, AL), no pagination.

[15] William T. Scott, "Mergers of the Past: The Congregational Methodist Church," *The Advance*, August 1945, 16.

[16] Fowler, 72-73.

[17] *Ibid.*, 74.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*, 75.

[20] *The Home Missionary*, April 1888, 504.

[21] Taylor, 38.

## **6. The Christians of Alabama and Georgia**

The Chattahoochee River does not inspire romance in the way that the Mississippi does, nor is it heavily industrialized, as the Tennessee and Ohio are. But the surrounding territory along its central-most reach hugging the Alabama and Georgia border had fertile enough soil for extensive cotton, and in later generations, pine tree, planting. Its settlers were hardy, industrious farmers of English and Scotch-Irish ancestry and, by and large, professed the two major religions of the South, Methodism and Southern Baptism. However, thanks to an evangelist who settled in the region, a tradition little known outside the region and often confused with other similar groups called the “Christian Connection” took root and, for a time, provided a system of relative doctrinal freedom and congregational government to the faithful who believed earnestly that God intended for the Church to be composed of equals, with no hierarchies compelling action other than the internal witness of the Spirit.

The Connection dates back to a dissenting Virginia Methodist preacher, James O’Kelly, whose complaint was against supposed tyranny by Bishop Francis Asbury over local pastorates in the late 18th century. As historian Ellen Eslinger put it,

(O’Kelly’s) influence probably owes more to the power of a straightforward, plain style of expression ... the peculiarities in his beliefs appeared to be more a product of (his) limited education than true theological error. His ideas about God, salvation, and sin were fairly conventional. Likewise, little if anything was original in his ideas about government and power ... His main contribution to southern religion was to bang the drum against “ecclesiastical monarchy”—to work toward a system of worship in keeping not only with early Christianity but also more appropriate for a country where, within living memory, popular notions of power and leadership had become much more democratic. [1]

The tradition of democratically-governed churches with no theological requirements of believers other than simple acceptance of Scripture as the rule of faith and life and demonstration of Christian character had analogues throughout the United States that seemed to rise synchronically with each other, [2] but the specifically O’Kelly flavor, one might call it, of preaching and church life, founded in the warm-heartedness of Methodism rather than the logical constructs of the Campbell-Stone wing of the Restoration Movement, was confined mainly to the tidewater region of Virginia and the Fall Line and Piedmont areas of North Carolina. Some generations later, though, an evangelist by the name of W. J. M. Elder, whose remains are in the churchyard of New Hope Congregational Christian Church near Roanoke, Alabama, started, often in brush arbors or other such shelters in the open countryside, churches whose members were content to call themselves “not the only Christians, but Christians only.”



Eschewing tight organization and fearful of setting precedents that might bind future generations' consciences, legend has it that early leaders either did not take minutes of meetings or destroyed them shortly afterward. Be that as it may, it was preferable to its adherents to the practice of early Methodist circuit riders of preaching on days other than the Sabbath when they happened to be in a settlement, and above all, to elites on the Eastern seaboard dictating to western frontier people what they should do. This latter point would prove to be enduring after all the other distinctives of the Connection fell away over time. One might say that Elder was the Elisha to O'Kelly's Elijah, taking his mantle into a new generation and place. Needless to say, an evangelist was a spiritual hero to a poor and struggling people as those two Biblical figures were, and all of them left their imprint upon each congregation founded.

Eastern Alabama and western Georgia, on both sides of the antebellum divide, were rugged territories, not suited to the plantation agriculture to either their east or west. Put that together with the isolation and insularity of subsistence farm life prior to the Great Depression, and the resources were simply not there for evangelizing further west. This was somewhat in keeping, surprisingly, with the main base of the Southern Christian movement in North Carolina and Virginia (much of the geographical gap between the two clusters can be accounted for by the success of the similar Campbell-Stone movement). What likely distinguished the "Elder Christians" from their neighbors was a refusal to engage in name-calling and accusations of heresy or apostasy against other groups. There was neither any dominance of the anti-mission movement that had fractured other denominations. The common person had as much right to grace and salvation as the next person, the Christians of Alabama and Georgia believed, and no one was going to tell them otherwise. They were free to think as they pleased, so long as they sought to earnestly live by the dictates of the New Testament.

Subsequent decades brought mostly economic change to parishioners, but not institutional changes to the Elder Christian movement. Many formerly self-sufficient farmers were forced to turn to sharecropping as the prices of cotton and other commodities plunged due to industrialization and prosperity. But others found themselves turning to work in the textile mills in towns like LaGrange and West Point in Georgia and Lanett and Langdale in Alabama. The Connection would follow its people to those communities, supplementing the rural base, whose churches usually met for worship only monthly or at most, twice per month.

These new town churches especially created a demand for greater education on the part of Connection clergy, to whom the only alternative available previously was Elon College (now University) in North Carolina. To fill that need, the conferences in Alabama and Georgia created Bethlehem College, later named Southern Union, in the

Randolph County, Alabama village of Wadley. The two-year institution operated under Christian, and later Congregational Christian, control until 1964, when it was transferred to the State of Alabama to join that state's community college system.

The merger with Congregationalism did not cause the Connection to disappear into the imagery of Pilgrims, covenants, and thanksgiving, as usually happened in the North [3]. It brought the Elder Christians mainly into fellowship with Congregational Methodist-heritage churches (see Part 5 from May) that had a similar reason for their founding, namely, freedom from episcopal control of clergy and churches. Within several years, clergy were circulating between both traditions with ease and no defensive self-consciousness, facilitated in part by the lack of formal dogmas [4] but, in the main, by their similar demographics of an Anglo-Saxon farm population. By the time the Southeast Convention of Congregational Christian Churches took shape in 1949, the loyalty of the Elder Christian movement to the transformative ethos of American Congregationalism was secure—for a while at least.

When the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1954, though, the clear, untroubled stream of the Elder Christian wing of the denomination began to muddy considerably, as did that of the Congregational Methodists. Despite some paternalistic concern for black Christians in Virginia and North Carolina in past decades, there was no ongoing heritage of concern for racial justice in the tradition, much like other Southern religious bodies at large, and the previously smooth relations the Alabama and Georgia churches had with national entities began to fray somewhat as fears rose about eventually breaching the racial barrier on the inter-church level.

The insular nature of this fellowship prevented abrupt change in its ranks, as beloved pastors helped to keep the churches together, names like Olin Sheppard, Jesse Dollar, Joe French, Wallace Roberts, and others. With only a few churches opting out of the new UCC in the early and mid-1960s, it looked like a traumatic, large-scale separation had been averted. And at the outset of the Southeast Conference's formation in 1966, most churches at least tolerated the denomination's pursuit of goals many did not understand, let alone approve of.

But that spirit diminished with the passage of time and the incursion into many pulpits of men from other traditions, some of whom had no appreciation whatsoever for the Connection's background and instead substituted fundamentalist doctrine for the covenantal style of days gone by. Many churches, perhaps unintentionally at first, lost contact with the main body of the Conference and the larger UCC, and when occasions came such as Annual Conference Meetings where they had to confront sister churches

with different sets of priorities, conflict occurred, as exemplified by a resolution put before the 1992 meeting by the East Alabama-West Georgia Association to denounce people in same-sex relationships entering the ministry. As one pastor put it simply, "We believe that those who openly prefer to live in sin or engage in sinful activities should not be called to spiritual leadership in the church." [5] The resolution, not surprisingly given the staunchly liberal proclivities of most of the other churches, did not pass in the form in which it was originally presented.

In an increasingly hostile scenario like the above situation, in the 1990s, many Christian Connection-heritage congregations opted to leave the UCC for either independence or the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. By the time the 25th General Synod in 2005 affirmed the right of same-sex couples to marry (a meeting held in the Conference's bounds itself), most had gone, with the East Alabama-West Georgia Association, once home to all the Connection's congregations, left with only a handful of churches. With the *de facto* cathedral of the movement, the Congregational Christian Church of Lanett, Alabama, departing in 2010, only Oak Grove Congregational Christian Church near Pine Mountain, Georgia was left, with another congregation, Sandy Creek UCC near LaFayette, Alabama, consisting of loyal members of several other departing congregations.

The Southeastern wing of the movement which showed so much promise toward bringing about a semblance of Christian unity came to its end, a victim of its disappearance into the landscape of Southern evangelicalism. As a group of churches held together mainly by family loyalties and not by either the original vision of founding or by constructive response to the new demands of an industrializing, then de-industrializing society, the Christian Connection has largely gone down as a footnote to the larger Restoration movement of the Disciples of Christ, the Independent Christian churches, and the Churches of Christ. But its blending of fervent preaching, heartfelt piety, and good works nonetheless left a mark upon the present-day Southeast Conference that should not be forgotten or dismissed lightly.

## NOTES

[1] Ellen Eslinger, "James O'Kelly: Father of Christian Fundamentalism in America," in *The Human Tradition in the Old South*, ed. James C. Klotter (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 73-74.

[2] See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) and Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

1997) for greater context about the Restoration Movement and its social setting in post-colonial America.

[3] Willis Elliott, "Forgotten Legacy: The Historical Theology of the 'Christian' Component of the United Church of Christ." *Historical Intelligencer: Historical Journal of the United Church of Christ* 3, no. 1 (1984): 12.

[4] Richard H. Taylor, "Christian Church Perspectives," in *Theology and Identity: Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ*, ed. Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, rev. ed. (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2007), 36.

[5] *Southeast News*, August 1992, 2.

## ***7. German Evangelicals and Swiss Reformed Seek Zion in the Southland***

The Southern U.S., for the most part, was in the 19th century most unlike much of the rest of the country in that it was not considered hospitable to non-English-speaking immigrants. Other than in a few large cities, most surnames were decidedly of Anglo-Saxon origin, as were the churches they attended, descendants of the Great Awakenings that took place within the confines of English-derived Puritanism. But here and there, one could find exceptions. Among them were two German-speaking immigrant groups that birthed the several congregations of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition in Alabama and Tennessee. They started out in Bavaria and Switzerland, respectively, but brought their language, customs and religion with them to the new land.

The settlers of Cullman, Alabama in 1874 and Gruetli, Tennessee in 1869 were seeking, like most settlers did in their time, more fertile land and more political and economic freedom than Europe would or could grant. In the case of Swiss emigrants to the hard, rocky soil of southeastern Tennessee, they had been hoodwinked by a fellow immigrant who had become the mayor of Knoxville [1]. The arrivals would have to make the best of a most disillusioning situation, made so by promises in promotional materials of lush, green pastures. The Swiss were practitioners of the Reformed faith, a compound of Calvinism and the peculiar teachings of Ulrich Zwingli, such as a conception of the Lord's Supper and Baptism as having no special saving functions, as Lutherans and Catholics by contrast taught. Dissension, instigated in all likelihood by the new freedoms people felt from traditional clerical control in a new country, prevented the Reformed Church from taking deep root in Gruetli (Episcopalians would find the Swiss more congenial in later decades and formed a parish largely with their descendants) [2]. But a number of them, along with some people who originally settled in the Great Plains in search of a warmer climate, traveled some 40-50 miles to the southwest to a place about ten miles north of the Alabama border, called Belvidere. The mainly flat land was far more suitable for large-scale agriculture than the mountain country was, and it was there that another Reformed church, one known today as First United Church, UCC, was established, with names such as Stalder, Maurer, Glaus, Zulliger, Zaugg, Roggli, and Kasserman in the original membership. [3] Certain other of the Gruetli Swiss eventually made their way to the Nashville area, where dairying land in particular was abundant. These people eventually met with a Rev. von Gruenigen, a German-speaking Reformed pastor, who formed a church with them, today's First United Church (E&R). [4] Both churches began the process of language and cultural assimilation well in advance of their Northern counterparts, who often deferred the process until the hand of anti-German sentiment during World War I forced the change to English-language services and confirmation classes.

As for Alabama, a progressive-minded military colonel who professed Protestantism in a staunchly Catholic place that Bavaria was, Johann G. Cullmann, led a group of several families from the overcrowded German-American redoubt of Cincinnati to an isolated place in the rolling hills of the north central part of the state, along the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. [5] The settlers were mainly of the Evangelical persuasion, which was the state church of many German principalities that combined elements of Lutheran and Reformed doctrine into a synthesis that emphasized piety, good works, and a staunch devotion to worship and education. Thus, the St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church was created to meet the spiritual needs of the immigrants in a place that was otherwise Anglophile and revivalistic, something largely repellent to German sensibilities. Dissension did take place in later years, through, bringing about Missouri Synod Lutheran and more moderate Lutheran "children" churches, though. [6]. In a separate but somewhat related development in the 1890s, some German immigrants in Birmingham founded the German Evangelical Freidenks Gemeinde, later known as St. John's Evangelical Church. Names like Klebs, Behrens, Schaefer, Steck, Puls, Bude, and Denker were on the rolls of the fledgling fellowship, located as it was in a place known for more exotic ethnicities such as Italian and Greek and even Russian, than German. [7]

All four of the congregations were strongly family-oriented by today's standards and considered themselves conservative in the literal sense of preserving traditional European Protestantism in the face of assaults from free thinking on the one hand and emotion-based fervor on the other. All greatly honored their pastors, who were supposed to be educated—and educators, particularly of the young for the age-old rite of confirmation at the "age of accountability," roughly twelve to fourteen. As the Evangelicals and the Reformed in the American scene began to very closely resemble each other in terms of worship, piety, theology, and mission, they looked toward organizational union. This happened in 1934, with the Tennessee churches coming from the Kentucky Classis (presbytery) of the Reformed Church in the United States and the Alabama churches coming from the Southern District (largely centered in New Orleans) of the Evangelical Synod of North America into the South Indiana Synod of the new Evangelical and Reformed Church several years later. As the name might suggest, the bulk of the churches were in that state, and as the president of that synod recognized, "Situated on a north-south line approximately 432 miles from Louisville (Kentucky), it was necessary in past years for delegates to travel by train to that city in order to meet with their brethren. It was practically impossible for many to do this." [8] In 1952, this was remedied by the establishment of an Alabama-Tennessee section of the Synod for fellowship purposes, with each congregation taking turns hosting.

By the 1950s, all were experiencing their share of the resurgence in American religion, with First E&R Church in Nashville able to move to the Green Hills neighborhood, leaving behind an outmoded building in a part of town where few of their members resided in the first place. The other churches, meanwhile, enhanced their physical facilities and programs to meet the needs of growing families. As the proceedings gained momentum for yet another merger, this time into what would become the UCC, there were predictable apprehensions in each of the four churches. With the necessary geographical realignment that would come would come also potential fellowship with churches not of their peculiar temperament, activism-minded liberal Congregational churches on the one hand and revival-minded "Congregational Christian" ones on the other. To make matters more anxious still, each faction within the Southeast Convention was debating the desirability of integrating the fellowship to make the UCC in the South bi-racial. E&R attitudes toward joining the Convention to become the Southeast Conference ran the gamut from enthusiastic support to determined opposition, although the evidence is mainly anecdotal, with no records of organized caucuses or the like. Unlike other parts of the country, controversial attention was focused upon the race issue, meaning that the E&R churches got lost in the shuffle and may not have gotten the proper attention from national, South Indiana Synod and Southeast Convention officials that their co-religionists in the North did.

Whether they wanted it or not, the E&R churches had no recourse but to go along, since their national constitution and bylaws did not at the time permit withdrawal as did the Congregational Christian tradition. And the UCC would bring changes aplenty to each congregation, as did the times in which the merger occurred, with many aspects of American life and Protestant faith under challenge from newer, more liberation-minded ideas. By and large, only First Church in Belvidere remained relatively unscathed by the turbulence. The other churches, in various ways conditioned by their past histories, reacted largely negatively to the denomination at large's embrace of new-fangled notions about worship, doctrine, and scope of mission activity.

In 1968, St. John's UCC in Cullman, Alabama called George Fidler, from the North Carolina Reformed tradition, to its pastorate. The North Carolina church represented a rather different subculture of the E&R Church, where revivals were not uncommon and testimonial experience was elevated to a higher level in the dogmatic scheme of things than elsewhere in the denomination. He brought his preferences to help refresh a church that had been dying out from cultural inbreeding, and it paid results in large increases of membership during the 1970s, with St. John's becoming the largest congregation in the entire Southeast Conference for many years. But, of course, it came with a price, as Fidler began vocally criticizing the rest of the denomination for not holding to his traditionalist interpretation of scripture and engaging in what he

considered advocacy for causes contrary to the beliefs of most all his membership. By the latter part of his nearly quarter-century pastorate, he simply dropped out of UCC life and governed the church as if it were independent. Meanwhile, to the south, in 1960, Birmingham's St. John's Church called an openly fundamentalist pastor to its pulpit, George Hewson, who, despite showing some initial leadership in the SEC transition, decided by the end of the decade he had had enough, and encouraged his parish to withdraw from the UCC, becoming independent in fact, not just in practice. The congregation years later relocated to the suburbs and took a different name.

With several nearby neighbors, Nashville's First E&R Church cautiously participated in inter-church gatherings with Brookmeade Congregational and Howard Congregational churches. But, on the whole, the congregation never was comfortable with the UCC or the Conference, despite its generous support of Our Church's Wider Mission (OCWM) until 2005. Things moved in a more independent, conservative-minded direction when, in 1987, a former television sportscaster, Robert Kurtz, became pastor. Kurtz led that congregation for several years when he was called by the Cullman church, of all places, to succeed Fidler. It was there that his and that congregation's relationship to the UCC deteriorated beyond repair, particularly when Tim Downs came to the conference minister position. Calling upon some old friends in Texas, Kurtz and St. John's officials laid the groundwork in the late 1990s for the new Evangelical Association, a conservative alternative to the UCC for mainly former E&R congregations. By 2002, when the Cullman congregation modified its constitution and bylaws to remove its relationship to the UCC, it was all over. St. John's continues today as an independent church loosely affiliated to the EA, while Nashville, by then known as First United Church (E&R), afterward had a bad experience with a female pastor running headlong into the staunch traditionalism there and opposition to the "Open and Affirming" program among some congregants. Nashville discontinued support of OCWM in the mid-2000s and now no longer participates in larger UCC functions, although it is still on the membership roll. Its prospects for future survival, like many inner-focused churches of various persuasions, are very much doubtful.

Surprisingly enough, the Belvidere church emerged as the most loyal church to the UCC despite being located in a mostly conservative rural area and having a significant portion of its membership more concerned about affirming community norms rather than challenging them. Unlike Cullman, it has had a larger vision outside its own walls, with generous support of OCWM and other mission work. Unlike Nashville, it did not react with vehemence against women pastors (it has had several in recent years) and was more open to "outsiders" in the larger community, perhaps because of a relative lack of competition in the moderate-to-liberal church market (for lack of a better term) in that community. But comparisons aside, despite the norm of short pastor tenures



and isolation from other UCC congregations (a problem afflicting the majority of Southeast Conference churches), it may well emerge as the sole survivor of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition. Such reminds one of the Parable of the Seed and Sower; after all, the seedbed was a new land.

## NOTES

[1] David E. Clayton, *Forgotten Colony* (n.p.: David E. Clayton, 1971), 3.

[2] *Ibid.*, 7-8.

[3] *First United Church, United Church of Christ, Belvidere, Tennessee: The 125th Anniversary, 1873-1998*, 2-3.

[4] From an unpublished (very) brief history of the congregation.

[5] *Centennial of the St. John's United Church*, Rev. George A. Fidler, Pastor, Cullman, Alabama (1974), no pagination.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Golden Jubilee, 1898-1948, St. John's Evangelical and Reformed Church, Birmingham, Alabama*, Carl H. Kluge, Pastor, 2.

[8] Paul J. Schlueter, "New Section in South Indiana Synod," in *The Messenger*, February 24, 1953, 29.

## **8. A Kudzu Pilgrimage—Liberal Congregationalism in the Southland**

In the overall spectrum of American Christianity, Congregationalism has, for better or worse, occupied a liberal place on the theological and cultural registers. This was especially the case from the mid-19th century onward, as, gradually but surely, churches and people began to shake loose the rigidities of their Calvinist, deterministic and pessimistic pasts. Emphasizing ethics and love over sin and fear, the “New Divinity” of the immediate antebellum period in New England made its mark in that region and places wherever New Englanders settled along the northern bounds of the U.S. The South, where an early attempt to re-create the orderly, conscientious culture of Puritanism dissipated into a slave-dependent economy and reactionary ideas about life and faith, would prove a very difficult place to plant a non-authoritarian variant of Christianity, given that the “Lost Cause” in the wake of the War Between the States would convince most people that theirs was a sacred society and that all others were defective at best and pagan at worst.

But the lack of cultural compatibility did not deter a group of Northern emigres to Atlanta and several home mission board representatives from founding what is today known as Central Congregational Church in 1882. Then, as a centennial history, *A Southern Pilgrimage*, noted,

... Atlanta was already establishing itself as a strategic transportation and commercial center. The railroads that had given life to Atlanta before the Civil War took on even greater importance when, with the addition of new lines, Atlanta became a connecting point between east-west and north-south routes. The city's strategic location on major transportation arteries helped make it a regional center of wholesale trade, of branch offices of national firms doing business in the Southeast, and of the Southeast's banking and insurance industries. (The national representatives) hoped that Atlanta would also become the regional headquarters of Congregationalism ...

Transportation and commerce made Atlanta a magnet for people, and by 1882 they were flocking in from all over; southern whites, primarily from the rural areas of North Georgia; former slaves, mainly from the plantations and towns of Middle Georgia; and northerners, from as far away as Maine ... Atlantans of northern birth were few, comprising only 3.5 percent of the population in 1880. But their influence far outstripped their number. They made up a disproportionate share of the city's commercial elite. As such, they helped set the tone of business activity, which caused visitors and the city's premier newspaperman to label Atlanta “Yankee City” and the “Chicago of the South.”

Here, then is the beginning of a contradiction, for Atlanta and also for Central Congregational Church: this was a city linked by steel mill, telegraph wire, and Yankee

capital to the Northeast, but also a city bound to the cultures, black and white, of the Old South. [1]

Working in such a paradoxical place, Central Church, which operated under several different monikers until settling on its present name around the turn of the century, provided a taste of the familiar to homesick Northerners, with a sober, restrained, yet gentle and joyful style of worship and mission. There were no protracted revivals or passionate denunciations of outsiders; orientation was definitely toward the cultivation of character and hospitality. While undergoing numerous changes, including a temporary division in the early 20th century, Central Church has remained in that mode for well nigh its entire history. The Social Gospel, foreign to the spiritual sensibilities of most Southern churches, was not at all anathema to Central's members. Withstanding a large "turnstile" membership and moves to a busy downtown intersection and later to suburban DeKalb County, the church has very much prospered over time and continues its fine tradition of service today through ministries to migrant workers in South Georgia; local schoolchildren; gays, lesbians, and the transgendered; and even the environment.

Some 75 miles to the northeast in a small Georgia village that was home to what would in future years become Piedmont College, an Ohio-born Congregationalist minister formed a congregation at a meeting in the Women's Christian Temperance Union hall. [2] This group, known as the Union Congregational Church, was another reform-minded, theologically open fellowship in the mold of Northern churches. Piedmont College had a similar aim, to make into red-blooded Americans boys from the isolated hills of northern Georgia, to free them especially from the hold of liquor and marital infidelity. Since the church was never large, it sought a novel way to survive by forming a federation with the local Methodist church in 1947, uniting two organizations and two sets of auxiliaries under one pastor and one program, at one location. Today's Methodist-Congregational Federated Church in Demorest, Georgia continues on this tradition of inclusion and social reform, albeit of a more moderate variety than some of their sister churches in the Southeast Conference.

By the time of World War I, the conflict between Biblical inerrancy and Christian freedom was sharpening, dividing many traditional churches into two. In the case of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, a combination of moral reform and a local Methodist congregation's hypocrisy in allowing a medicinal alcohol manufacturer to remain a member in good standing despite his profession spurred on that church's founding in 1914. [3] But "freedom of the pulpit" was another rallying cry that fell on deaf ears by Tennessee Methodists, and Charles Haven Myers refused to become a clergy victim, becoming instead Pilgrim's first pastor. In later years, the

church's best-known pastor was an Englishman by the name of Arnold Slater, who served between 1944 and 1971. His firm yet gentle pulpit delivery and his strong social consciousness made Pilgrim into a leader among Congregational churches in the Southeast and liberal churches in the larger Chattanooga area. First located in downtown, the congregation moved to the foot of Missionary Ridge (itself named after the Cherokee missions by Congregationalists in the early 19th century) in the 1950s, where it remains today. In addition to being a generous contributor to Our Church's Wider Mission (usually in the top five of church giving each year), Pilgrim has raised leaders for the Alabama-Tennessee Association and the Southeast Conference, names too numerous to point out here.

Birmingham, Alabama, the steel-making capital of the South for much of its history, also experienced an influx of Northern-born businessmen and managers as Atlanta did. In 1903, some of them established today's Pilgrim UCC, known as Pilgrim Congregational until the late 2000s. One early pastor, George Eaves, took a strong interest in the then-current epidemic of tuberculosis and helped found a local association to combat it, a forerunner of today's American Lung Association. [4] The early Pilgrim took a number of twists and turns, eventually gaining a large number of former members of First Presbyterian Church who were protesting their denomination's hardline Southern Calvinism. By the 1940s, the church had a downtown edifice and some 500 members on the rolls. But structural issues with that building forced another move in 1959 to the lush suburb of Mountain Brook, with an A-frame construction that was so noteworthy that it made several magazine advertisements and was deemed "Blue Roof Church" due to the hue of the coating sprayed on the metallic cover. In the 1960s, the church experienced division over the Civil Rights Movement, but survived with a greater appreciation for the new UCC's social action concerns. After a quarter century of theologically moderate pastorates and attempts to position itself as a socially prominent church, Pilgrim moved into a more progressive direction under the Rev. Richard Sales in the 1990s, and became the first Alabama UCC congregation to adopt the "Open and Affirming" platform in 2001. The aging of the 1950s structure caused the church to return to the city in 2007-08, first taking up space at Southside Baptist Church before renovating a former car dealership showroom floor in the Lakeview neighborhood. Today, although having a small membership, it is in the forefront of local and statewide activism for greater rights for all and an inclusive way of being church.

The geographically farthest liberal Congregational-heritage church in our conference may well have done the most for the greater UCC over time, as a springboard for countless ordained ministers. Brookmeade Congregational Church in Nashville was born from the ruins of an earlier congregation, which operated as Collegeside

Congregational Church from 1928 to 1953. Some remnant members of that group reorganized as the Pilgrim Fellowship, meeting on the Vanderbilt University campus. Since the 1929 relocation of the Congregational-related Atlanta Theological Seminary to the Vanderbilt School of Religion (now Divinity School), Collegeside/Brookmeade has had a peculiar vocation as a “teaching parish” for seminarians to hone their preaching, pastoral care, and teaching skills before being ordained to the church at large. Taking its name from the suburban subdivision where it eventually settled, Brookmeade was at the forefront of Nashville’s dynamic but peaceful Civil Rights struggles in the 1960s, and likewise, three decades later, was among the pioneers of the “Open and Affirming” movement, becoming the first church in the entire Southeast Conference to adopt the platform, all the way back in 1994. In between those two eras, the congregation witnessed the heartbreak of losing its sanctuary to a fire in 1973 but also the joy of constructing a new one in 1981. The longest-tenured pastor in its history, Daniel Rosemergy, was second to none as a staunch activist for progressive causes in Middle Tennessee, and many Brookmeade members also have similar reputations in the community at large. [5]

The last church to take a Congregational-like shape was founded right on the eve of the UCC merger. In late 1956, some members of Knoxville, Tennessee’s Second Presbyterian Church sought to forestall their congregation’s relocation from downtown to a plot west of the University of Tennessee campus. Failing to convince either congregational or presbytery leaders, they worked out an agreement whereby they could continue to worship in their beloved Gothic building—albeit in another denomination. Due to a number of factors, namely familiarity from previous associations, the Congregational Christian Churches was chosen. [6] With a “ready-made” congregation, the First Congregational Church developed quickly into a leader of liberal theology and social action for a decidedly conservative center of Appalachia. However, the building eventually became a crippling burden due to maintenance, and the church, ironically enough, wound up leaving in 1968 for greener pastures in Western Knoxville. First setting up in an old stone house on a new piece of property, the church built a modern, all-in-one structure in 1972. Signaling that it was more or less a restart, the church took the name “Church of the Savior” at the instigation of pastor Donald Flick. Flick, and later John Lackey and current pastor John Bluth Gill, supervised a re-orientation toward service to the community, whether in traditional charity forms or advocacy for social justice, of which COS is second to none perhaps in all of East Tennessee. So strong have the justice commitments been that in 1984, rather than give into hysteria over AIDS by parents, the church decided to let go its child care center rather than expel the new fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Church of Knoxville from its premises, a highly unusual move of the time. [7] The special COS

brand of inclusion and witness has attracted strong congregational growth in recent years, approaching some 300 people.

All of the six churches mentioned here are geographically isolated from one another, usually by anywhere from 100 to 150 miles, so physical proximity played no role in their development. Instead, they typically draw their leadership from many backgrounds, whose common denominator is a desire for a better world and a non-legalistic understanding of God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian religion in general. Most recently-established congregations among Euro-Americans in the UCC look to that model to follow in their common life, to be sure. But in a more triumphant vein, the six churches of the Liberal Congregational tradition in the Southeast Conference prove that, with strong leadership, vision, and determination, a pilgrimage can be made through anything—even the kudzu that covers the Southern ground.

## NOTES

[1] Harold L. Johnson et al., *A Southern Pilgrimage: Central Congregational Church of Atlanta, Georgia, 1882-1982*, ed. Robert C. McMath, Jr., 2-3.

[2] Sarah Gillespie Fenner, *History of the Methodist-Congregational Federated Church of Demorest* (Demorest, GA: 1989), 1.

[3] Kay Baker Gaston, *A History of Pilgrim Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Chattanooga, Tennessee on the Occasion of Its Seventy-fifth Anniversary, 1914-1989*, 3.

[4] Frances T. Feazel, *A History of the Pilgrim Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, 1903-2003* (Birmingham, 2003), 5.

[5] *A Collection for Celebration 2003: The Past, Present, and Future* (Nashville: Brookmeade Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ, 2003).

[6] Charles H. Faulkner, John R. Lackey, and John Bluth Gill, *A Light Set on a Hill: The 50 Year Anniversary of the Church of the Savior* (Knoxville, 2007), 2.

[7] *Ibid.*, 17, 30.

## **9. Errand in the Wilderness—Congregationalism in Appalachia**

Appalachia is an overlooked region of the United States, put bluntly. No one considers it even remotely glamorous, with its multitude of social and economic problems deriving from isolation and resource exploitation. It has been compared to the overseas “third world” countless times as a result, and is further impenetrable to outsiders due to the persistence of traditional folkways and customs. Such a subject is not easily treated in a short essay as this.

But it was also the setting for several noble, if faintly paternalistic, attempts to uplift the standard of teaching and preaching in the region through the same body that had valiantly worked for years several hundred miles to the south, the American Missionary Association. Its ministers and schoolteachers established a fairly wide network of schools and churches in the outposts of the highlands and mountain country of Kentucky and Tennessee. Although only two churches survive as full members of the United Church of Christ in the Southeast Conference today, the Appalachian or “mountain white” tradition is worth mentioning as an example of one strand of our rich tapestry of institutions and voices.

According to a 2010 history of Community Church in Pleasant Hill, Tennessee, it was a Massachusetts-born settler’s desire for a thorough education for her and other children that brought, first a female teacher, and later a Maine pastor to the wilds of Cumberland County, on a plateau situated about 2,000 feet above sea level. The pastor, “Father” Benjamin Dodge, began work on what would become Pleasant Hill Academy and Community Church. A later headmaster and his physician wife—a novelty for that day—built upon that foundation, with the work of Dr. May Cravath Wharton, chronicled in the book *Doctor Woman of the Cumberlands*, materializing itself in drastically improved medical care to the residents of the area. Eventually this led to the founding of a sanatorium in 1922, which took the name “Uplands” from a poem written by May Wharton’s cousin. In later decades, the hospital would move to the county seat of Crossville, and the area would gradually evolve into a center of retirement for missionaries and (mostly) Congregational Christian pastors from other states, with the heritage carefully preserved along with an increasing number of amenities to meet the needs of the new residents. The Academy eventually closed when public education became available in that area in the 1940s, analogous to what had happened to the AMA schools serving African-Americans. [1]

At the now-withdrawn First Congregational Church in Crossville, the long tenure of Abram Nightingale as pastor from 1924 to 1956 was marked by an intense period of service to church and community. From a 1929 article in *The American Missionary*:

A fine young citizen of the community died of typhoid fever. The minister was called upon to preach his funeral sermon.

"It was not God's will that he should die," he told his hearers, "but your own will. The disease that killed him is one that has no place in any intelligent community. It can be controlled, and it is your job and mine to control it. It is our own work that this fine young friend lies dead among us, for our carelessness has killed him."

... Between the epidemic and the minister, people began to think about it pretty seriously. The upshot of it was that by one way and another, through the co-operation of physicians and the persuasion of those who were beginning to think of health in community terms, 1,000 inoculations against typhoid were given last year. As a result there were not more than a dozen cases in the county, and only one death.

A cursory examination of school children in the county showed that from 60 to 70 per cent of them were physically defective. There were thousands of cases of undernourishment, bad teeth and eyes, hookworm and other ailments. There were also found many children attending school with active cases of tuberculosis.

Mass meetings were held, teachers and parents were interested, civic clubs were enrolled in the campaign, and when the county court next met, the town and its neighboring communities moved in on them. With banners flying and spokesmen [sic] ready, they packed the courthouse, and there they stayed until they had secured an appropriation as a beginning for an efficient health unit. Ways also were found to utilize a Red Cross fund left over from war work, and the campaign was begun.

Already—that was only a year ago—four weeks of tuberculosis chest clinics have been held throughout the county, a day in a place; and hundreds of tests have been given and treatments recommended. Baby clinics have been held, with the enthusiastic co-operation of a trained nurse in a well-equipped mountain school not far away. People are beginning to think that a full-time health unit is even more of a necessity than a sheriff. Already a sanitation office is stationed in the county, and the clean-up which must precede any practical health campaign is well under way. [2]

Yet another congregation, in a coal-mining village named Evarts, Kentucky carried out an integrated Vacation Bible School with a black Baptist church in the early 1960s. [3]. Some of the other churches in this group, however, were established by Northern settlers, as the Congregational Church of Deer Lodge, Tennessee and the Barton Chapel Congregational Church at Robbins, Tennessee were. Whatever their origins, the churches were very much of a piece with the "pure" churches that the AMA sought to build for African-Americans in that they stressed uplift over the otherworldliness associated with "mountain religion" in most other places. Of course, pastors frequently



played the role of the schoolteacher for a particular community for the first few generations.

As with the AMA's mission among blacks, the movement declined during the late 20th century, due to the growth of public education and the growing popularity of Baptist, Holiness, and Pentecostal faiths. Economic decline due to abandonment of coal mines and environmental devastation due to practices such as stripping lands for coal and timber also had negative impacts on the communities where these churches were located, making them unfeasible for future development. The Deer Lodge, Tennessee church survived, for example, by sharing a ministry with two nearby Presbyterian congregations from the 1970s to the 2000s. By contrast, Evarts, Kentucky's congregation transferred to the United Methodist Church for fellowship purposes in 1978. A few others withdrew in reaction to the UCC's espousal of liberal political stands. But the mission to the mountains was by no means a failure, as it permitted a word of hope to be spoken to one of America's most despairing regions.

## NOTES

[1] Ted Braun, *Mission Without Boundaries: The Remarkable Story of the Pleasant Hill Community Church, Pleasant Hill, Tennessee: 1885-2010*.

[2] Katharine Atherton Grimes, "A Rural Preacher with a New Message," *The American Missionary*, September 5, 1929, 310.

[3] Carolyn P. Welch, "We Integrated Our Vacation Church School," *United Church Herald*, May 16, 1963, 19, 34.

**10. From *Memories of a Southern Sojourn* by Erston M. Butterfield, unpublished manuscript, October 2001**

In the Spring of 1952, Dr. Thomas Tripp, Director of Town and Country Work (for the Congregational Christian Churches), called to see if we might be interested in the Southeast Convention, composed of 127 white churches in six states practicing segregation—Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and the Panhandle of Florida. The answer was an emphatic “No!” Go South? No way!

Soon after, Dr. Stanley U. North, General Secretary of the Division of Church Extension and Evangelism, called telling of needs and urging consideration of a move to the South. Again “No” was the reply. The South, its culture and traditions, were foreign to us and we had no desire to move from (southwestern) Ohio.

Then came a call from the Executive Vice President of the Board of Home Missions, Dr. Truman B. Douglass. Somehow, one didn’t say “No” to (him) ...

I flew down to meet with the Board. (I was) met at the Atlanta airport by Montez Albright, the office secretary ...

The Board gathered at Central Church was most impressive. Lay persons and ministers alike spoke of a changing culture in a growing South. I was caught up in their descriptions of the New South and wanted to be part of the adventure! All was so positive and congenial; all doubts were erased.

... So how does one get acquainted with 127 churches (9,658 all white members) spread over parts of 6 states and served by 111 ministers? I thought it could be done the first year!

... The Southeast Convention was a new union of the Congregational Christian Churches of the deep South. It was organized in 1949 after the pattern of the Southern Convention of the Congregational Christian Churches ...

... The average country congregation numbered 34. In metropolitan areas we did better: Birmingham Pilgrim accounted for 230, Pilgrim in Chattanooga listed 318 and Atlanta Central had 586 members.

... Of the 127 churches, 76 might be classified as “rural,” 45 as “town,” and only six as “city” ...

... Asked where the rural churches were located, the standard answer was, "Three miles out of town and three miles back in the woods." A joke, yes, but too true! A number of these churches were "liberal" theologically as well as politically, but others had become like their Southern Baptist neighbors.

Many rural churches were in "Yoked Parishes" served by lay or licensed preachers. Some of the "Yoked Parishes" had fully trained ministers, who provided outstanding leadership in the Southeast Convention.

Mathematically we were well balanced: One third of the ministers serving churches had seminary or college degrees. A third had high school training. One third had completed grade school. All were thoroughly dedicated to the ministry!

... Filling vacant pulpits was always a problem. Few northern ministers, even missionary minded ones, could accept the idea of even considering a segregated church in the segregated Southeast Convention. "Do-gooders" had a rough time and soon returned North. Were it not for the upward mobility of local ministers, Pastoral Placement would have been a very difficult task.

... (One) unfortunate conflict was with Warner Carpenter of South Georgia. Although not having any seminary training, he acted like the Bishop of South Georgia. Many of the churches in the South Georgia Association looked to him for guidance.

In the early years of my stay, Warner often surprised me and the Board of Directors with his willingness to support Convention programs. His help in the "Day of Decision" effort was invaluable. He began the "Church Builders Club" and saw that all funds were used for building projects around the Convention.

But, he was also attuned to the "anti-merger" group, and at times circulated false rumors among the churches. Often, it was necessary to rebut his unfounded fears and letters to Convention churches.

Then came the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, and everything changed. No longer was I the "fair-haired boy" in Atlanta but the "damn Yankee from Ohio!"

... Something needs to be said about the Convention of the South ... The Rev. J. Taylor Stanley, a very able African-American, was the Superintendent and Registrar of 215 congregations scattered over 12 states ... Our paths seldom crossed, but I remember one day in 1955. Our schedules took us both to Alabama. He to First (Congregational

Church), Birmingham, me to a rural church west of the city. Since we always tried to work in several appointments each trip, we met on the streets of Birmingham.

After a few comments about the weather, our conversation went something like: "Hey, let's have lunch together!", "Oh, Erston, you know we can't do that! They'd lynch us for sure!" "Not here in the city, but at that little roadside park on the outskirts of town ..."

"I'll get the food, you just meet me there in 20 minutes," "O.K., I'll be there!" was his daring reply. So, off we went.

I picked up sandwiches and drinks for both of us at a dime store ... and headed for our rendezvous. Taylor was waiting, and no one bothered us as we ate our agape lunch under God's blue sky!

... Most ministers and congregations remained true to the Congregational Christian beliefs in the Fatherhood [sic] of God and the Brotherhood of Man, but many of our white brothers didn't want to get involved in "the controversy."

This does not mean that all took this way out. There were some ministers and lay persons who spoke out forcefully for racial justice. I had the full backing of the Board of Directors and many congregations. But, the "right of private judgment" and the "autonomy of the local church" were often used as a shield against local criticism.

I received fewer invitations to visit racially conservative congregations and unhappy events began to occur. Some qualified as "harassment" ...

... There were two good routes I liked to take when visiting congregations in Alabama. One was through Columbus, Georgia, and the other through Anniston, Alabama. For a while after the (*Brown v. Board of Education*) decision (before getting smart and taking other routes), I could expect an escort (one or more cars) through the counties. How did they know my schedule and my car? I had suspicions.

Only once did such harassment warrant a report to city authorities. After a meeting at one of our rural churches, the drive home through Anniston took a menacing turn.

At the edge of the city, two pickups pulled in back of me. They were following too closely and apparently had no intent of passing but only to intimidate. A third pickup passed the two and threw a blazing cross which hit my windshield and bounced off into a field. With vision impaired, I ended up in the ditch. Needless to say, I was discombobulated as the three pickups disappeared down the road.

The cross had done no real damage, and soon a passing truck stopped, got me back on the road, and told how to get to the city police station ...

One day, when attending an Association meeting in South Georgia, someone placed an *Atlanta Journal* in my car. Scrawled in red lipstick on the front page were the words of advice: "(racial expletive) Lover — Go Home." Dr. Thomas Anderson, one of the speakers that day, made a big thing of the event and reported it to the whole gathering. All expressed their anger and assured us that only an outsider could have done such a thing.

Then, one time, someone wrote to all the ministers of the South Alabama-Northwest Florida Association not to send their young people to summer camp because there were to be (African-Americans) present. (I think that was when Millard Fuller was president of Pilgrim Fellowship.) Anyway, as far as could be determined, no minister followed the advice, and the camp was a success.

... In the summer of 1956, the Kentucky/Tennessee Conference held its first desegregated "Family Camp." Only one black family attended, but we were "interracial"—a first for the C.C. churches of the South!

... My older daughter remembers that it rained most of the week, that it was fun playing with the black minister's children, that the comic dramas of "Skit Night" were great, and that we had a special missionary visitor from India ...

... In the months that followed, the larger city churches began to face up to a culture which now demanded "integration" of the races. They found it easier to convince their people on legal rather than theological grounds. The Supreme Court had ruled, and they must now obey the law. Some ministers, like Arnold Slater of Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga, held interracial meetings and stressed justice, peace and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These were difficult days for our churches in the South, but most were a part of the new day aborning.

# APPENDIX

## ***A. A Timeline of the Southeast Conference***

**1681** Non-Anglican Protestant settlers in Charleston, South Carolina establish the “Independent Meeting House.” The church continues to operate today as Circular Congregational Church.

**1754** Puritans from New England (via South Carolina) establish the community and church of Midway, Georgia. The Congregational church there sent many men into the Christian ministry, and some of its members became high-ranking colonial politicians.

**1830s** The “Christian” movement founded by James O’Kelly in the 1790s appears for the first time in present Conference territory with several churches emerging in Georgia. The movement had spread to Alabama by 1850.

**1865** The end of the Civil War witnesses the emergence of a large number of schoolteachers and ministers sent by the American Missionary Association to teach, and bring the Gospel to, recently emancipated slaves. Many schools, colleges and churches are formed as a result.

**1867** The first African-American Congregational church founded under AMA auspices, Plymouth Church in Charleston, South Carolina, begins.

**1869** Some farmers from Switzerland immigrate to Grundy County, Tennessee. Descendants of these settlers established German Reformed churches in Belvidere (1873) and Nashville (1891).

**1873** Johann Cullmann, a failed revolutionary from Bavaria, brings a group of Germans from Cincinnati, Ohio to north central Alabama to establish the city of Cullman and, the following year, St. John’s Evangelical Protestant Church.

**1882** The first postbellum Euro-American Congregational church in present Conference territory, Piedmont Church, begins in Atlanta. It is known today as Central Congregational Church.

**1888** Numerous Euro-American Congregational Methodist churches in Georgia join the Congregational fellowship, with some Alabama congregations joining later.

**1931** Congregationalists and Christians merge.

**1934** The Evangelical Synod of North American, with two churches in Alabama, and the Reformed Church in the United States, with two congregations in Tennessee, join to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

**1939** The South Indiana Synod of the Evangelical and Reformed is established at a meeting in Louisville, Kentucky.

**1949** The state conferences of Euro-American Congregational Christians in Alabama and Northwest Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, and Tennessee and Kentucky, join forces to create the Southeast Convention. The Rev. Dr. David W. Shepherd is the first superintendent.

**1950** African-American Congregational Christian churches and conferences throughout most Southern states finally obtain autonomy with the founding of the Convention of the South, led by the Rev. J. Taylor Stanley.

**1952** The Rev. Erston M. Butterfield, an assistant superintendent in Ohio, becomes superintendent of the Southeast Convention.

**1955** The Rev. Andrew Young, later a Civil Rights leader, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, and mayor of Atlanta, begins ministerial career serving two small AMA churches in southwestern Georgia.

**1957** The Rev. James H. Lightbourne, Jr., a Suffolk, Virginia pastor, becomes superintendent of the Southeast Convention.

**1957** The United Church of Christ comes into being from the union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church.

**1960** United Church of Huntsville, Alabama, the first new church start in the Southeast as a UCC congregation, begins operation.

**1962** Fraternal delegates from the Convention of the South attend a meeting of the Southeast Convention, held at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Birmingham, Alabama, for the first time.

**1965** After an unsuccessful attempt a year earlier and by only a 54 percent vote, the Southeast Convention decides to invite the churches of the Convention of the South and former Evangelical and Reformed churches in the territory to join. This will become the new Southeast Conference.

**1966** The Southeast Conference, one of the last conferences to take shape in the UCC, begins operation, with the Rev. Jesse Dollar serving as interim conference minister. Nine associations, only one of which is integrated, enter the Conference.

**1966** The Rev. Dr. William J. Andes, an Elon College, North Carolina pastor, becomes the first elected conference minister.

**1969** The Conference takes major steps forward in racial reconciliation with the formation of the Alabama-Tennessee and Georgia-South Carolina associations and the election of the Rev. Dr. Homer McEwen, pastor of First Congregational Church in Atlanta, as the first African-American moderator of the Conference.

**1974** The UCC begins its national 17/76 campaign to aid the historic AMA colleges in the South and other educational endeavors. Led by strong participation from its African-American congregations, Southeast Conference churches contribute over \$65,000 by the end of the decade.

**1978** Millard Fuller, a son of the Lanett, Alabama Congregational Christian Church, starts Habitat for Humanity.

**1980** After 14 years, Dr. Andes retires from the Conference Minister post, giving the reins to the Rev. Dr. Emmett O. Floyd, a Greensboro, North Carolina pastor.

**1988** Dr. Floyd retires and is replaced by the Rev. Roger D. Knight, a regional executive of the UCC's Office for Church Life and Leadership in Minneapolis. The Rev. Horace S. Sills, a veteran conference minister from Pennsylvania, serves as interim.

**1990** The Conference adopts a new constitution and by-laws, to strengthen its committees and enable them to respond to the congregations' needs and the mission of the larger church.

**1991** The Conference embarks on its first-ever capital funds campaign, Visions '91.



**1994** Brookmeade Congregational Church in Nashville becomes the Conference's first church to adopt the Open and Affirming (ONA) designation, welcoming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons into full participation in its life.

**1995** The Rev. Mr. Knight resigns to take a pastorate in Cleveland, Ohio. A former South Central Conference associate minister, the Rev. Edwin Mehlhaff, becomes interim.

**1996** The Rev. Timothy C. Downs, an Allentown, Pennsylvania pastor, is elected the fourth Southeast Conference Minister.

**1996** Community Congregational Church in Montgomery, Alabama becomes the Conference's first-ever successful African-American new church start.

**1999** The Conference begins a several-year program to record the histories of its AMA-heritage congregations called "Rekindle the Gift." The Rev. Joyce Holiday, Associate Conference Minister, directs the effort, which results in a book published in 2005 titled *On the Heels of Freedom*.

**1999** The Rev. Dr. Richard Sales, Associate Conference Minister and a former missionary in Africa, begins conducting sessions of the Theology Among the People (TAP) program, designed to prepare laypeople and licensed pastors to conduct ministry more effectively.

**2000** Open Community UCC in Atlanta begins, making the first-ever church for Koreans and Korean-Americans in the Conference.

**2001** Church of the Savior in Roswell, Georgia, a congregation formerly affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, joins the UCC, bringing a new tradition into the Conference.

**2002** Stone Mountain, Georgia's Victory for the World Church, an African-American congregation with more than 5,000 members, joins the UCC. This more than doubles the Conference's leadership.

**2005** The Conference hosts the 25th General Synod of the UCC, held at the Georgia World Congress Center, in Atlanta July 1-5. The Synod receives national attention for its support of the right of same-sex couples to marry.

**2006** Conference Associate Minister Cameron Trimble launches the “Comma Connections” initiative to provide worship and fellowship to those not desiring to associate with a traditional church structure.

**2006** The Conference embarks upon the “Nehemiah Initiative” to plant and strengthen new churches and reinvigorate existing ones.

**2007** The Conference adopts a new constitution and by-laws, to correspond with the national UCC restructuring of 1999.

**2009** The Conference votes overwhelmingly to begin its second-ever capital funds campaign, titled “Transforming Churches, Transforming Lives.”

**2010** The Nehemiah Initiative and its New Church Leadership Institute becomes its own stand-alone organization. The Center for Progressive Renewal. It becomes a full-fledged counseling service for churches and pastors.

**2011** Thanks to a grant by the Henry Luce Foundation, the TAP program offered an opportunity to travel to Thailand for a “global immersion experience.”

**2011** The TAP program began a phase-out in favor of a new, intentional ministerial preparation course of study titled “PATHWAYS.”

**2011-12** The three functioning associations with the Conference cede their historic church and ministry functions (ordination and oversight) to a new Conference-wide committee. By 2013, the Georgia-South Carolina had disbanded as a result.

**2013** The Rev. Dr. Downs retires after 17 years as conference minister; Randy Hyvonen, a Montana native, serves as interim.

**2014** The Conference unanimously elects the Rev. June Boutwell, recently the executive director of a UCC camp in California and interim pastor of a Disciples of Christ congregation, as conference minister for a designated three-year term.

**2015** With the U.S. Supreme Court legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the nation, several Conference congregations are at the forefront, advocating for legalization and providing space and personnel for weddings.

## ***B. A Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Southeast Conference***

O Creator God, who brings into being things that once did not exist and redeems and strengthens those things that do, we come to You in humble thanksgiving for the 50 years You have granted us as a people known as the Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Especially, we thank You for the witness of the American Missionary Association and its potent stand for the Gospel, for an educated ministry and laity, and for the moral uplift that impacted so many communities over the years;

We thank You for the fervor and brightness of the Christian Connection and Congregational Methodist heritages, with their clarion call for repentance and holiness in all our lives, and their steadfast conviction that Your church should have all voices represented, not just those ordained;

We thank You for the arrival in our midst of the German Evangelicals and the Swiss Reformed, whose hearty theology and love for the Gospel helped to steady our course during turbulent times when we could easily have forgotten that Your church is set apart for the redemption of our world;

We thank You for the inter-cultural transportation of Northern Congregationalism to our territory, bringing with it an openness to further insight into Your truth, the tolerance that is requisite to peaceful living, and its keen appreciation for society and the need always to reform it to conform to the life of Your Realm;

We thank You for the contributions smaller groups have made over the years to our life together, especially those of Korean and Welsh descent, those congregations formerly of the Baptist tradition, and those forward-looking churches of the emergent movement;

We thank You for the great intensity and magnificent emotional power of our Afro-centric congregations, for their vitality in their respective locales, and for their deep and abiding concern for the welfare of African-Americans and others;

We thank You for the new churches that have been started since our denomination was founded over a half century ago, with a special thanks for their loyalty to us and their desire to hold together "maintenance and mission" in a creative dialogue that should inspire all of us;

We thank You for bringing to us people of alternative sexual orientation, freeing them from fear, anger, and all forms of negativity toward an acceptance of the way they are and a fitting for Your service in our time;

We thank You for the countless men and women who have given of their time and resources over several decades to provide leadership for all our churches, associations, and this Conference, in the full knowledge that none of our fellowship and covenant would have been possible otherwise;

We thank You for the lives of, and service from, our executives: Jesse Dollar, William Andes, Emmett Floyd, Horace Sills, Roger Knight, Edwin Mehlhaff, Timothy Downs, Randall Hyvonen, and June Boutwell, along with those of other staff members throughout the years;

We thank You for our ecumenical partners in several denominations throughout our region and for the chance to work cooperatively where possible to achieve common goals, such as ministerial placement and disaster relief;

We thank You for the chance to gather at least annually to celebrate our work, make new friends and renew old ones, and for the chances for our churches to get together for a common witness on certain occasions, such as joint Maundy Thursday services;

We thank You, above all, for the great duty and privilege of following Your Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, wherever He leads us. O Lord, keep us in Your care and in the great arms of Your most precious church, now and to the end of our days, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.